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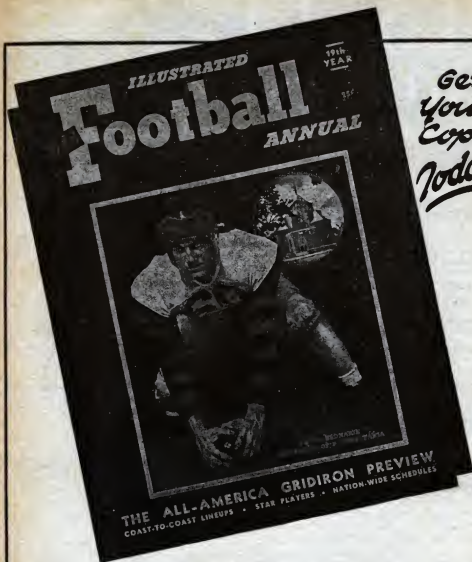
Winter Issue 1948



Vol. IV, No. 1

20c per copy

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THE BEAST-JEWEL OF MARS

By LEIGH BRACKETT

Burk Winters was a panting, shambling ape, fleeing through dark and echoing pits of horror. Behind him hissed the lashes of the jeering mob, savagely exultant at having debauched still another proud Terran into something that crawled.

BURK WINTERS REMAINED IN the passenger section while the *Star-flight* made her landing at Kahora Port. He did not think that he could

bear to see another man, not even one he liked as much as he did Johnny Niles, handle the controls of the ship that had been his for so long.



All the dark secrets of Terran evolution were laid bare in this garden of evil, under that prism of hell!



He did not wish even to say good bye to Johnny, but there was no avoiding it. The young officer was waiting for him as he came down the ramp, and the deep concern he felt was not hidden in the least by his casually hearty grin.

Johnny held out his hand. "So long, Burk. You've earned this leave. Have fun with it."

Burk Winters looked out over the vast tarmac that spread for miles across the ochre desert. An orderly, roaring confusion of trucks and flat-cars and men and ships — ore ships, freighters, tramps, sleek liners like the *Starflight*, bearing the colours of three planets and a dozen colonies, but still arrogantly and predominantly Terran.

Johnny followed his gaze and said softly, "It always gives you a thrill, doesn't it?"

Winters did not answer. Miles away, safe from the thundering rocket blasts, the glassite dome of Kahora, Trade City for Mars, rose jewel-like out of the red sand. The little sun stared wearily down and the ancient hills considered it, and the old, old wandering wind passed over it, and it seemed as though the planet bore Kahora and its spaceport with patience, as though it were a small local infection that would soon be gone.

He had forgotten Johnny Niles. He had forgotten everything but his own dark thoughts. The young officer studied him with covert pity, and he did not know it.

Burk Winters was a big man, and a tough man, tempered by years of deep-space flying. The same glare of naked light that had burned his skin so dark had bleached his hair until it was almost white, and just in the last few months his grey eyes seemed to have caught and held a spark of that pitiless radiance. The easy good nature was gone out of them, and the lines that laughter had shaped around his mouth had deepened now into bitter scars.

A big man, a hard man, but a man who was no longer in control of himself. All during the voyage out from Earth he had chain-smoked the little Venusian cigarets that have a sedative effect. He was smoking one now, and even so he could not keep his hands steady nor stop the everlasting *tic* in his right cheek.

"Burk." Johnny's voice came to him from a great distance. "Burk, it's none of my business, but . . ." He hesitated, then blurted out, "Do you think Mars is good for you, now?"

Quite abruptly, Winters said, "Take good care of the *Starflight*, Johnny. Good bye."

He went away, down the ramp. The pilot stared after him.

The Second Officer came up to Johnny. "That guy has sure gone to pieces," he said.

Johnny nodded. He was angry, because he had come up under Winters and he loved him.

"The damn fool," he said. "He shouldn't have come here." He looked out over the mocking immensity of Mars and added, "His girl was lost out there, somewhere. They never found her body."

A SPACE-PORT TAXI took Burk Winters into Kahora, and Mars vanished. He was back in the world of the Trade Cities, which belong to all planets, and none.

Vhia on Venus, N'York on Earth, Sun City in Mercury's Twilight Belt, the glassite refuges of the Outer Worlds, they were all alike. They were dedicated to the coddling of wealth and greed, little paradises where millions were made and lost in comfort, where men and women from all over the Solar System could expend their feverish energies without regard for such annoyances as weather and gravitation.

Other things than the making of money were done in the Trade Cities. The lovely plastic buildings, the terraces and gardens and the glowing web of moving walks that spun them together, offered every pleasure and civilized vice of the known worlds.

Winters hated the Trade Cities. He was used to the elemental honesty of space. Here the speech, the dress, even the air one breathed, were artificial.

And he had a deeper reason than that for his hatred.

Yet he had left N'York in feverish haste to reach Kahora, and now that he was here he felt that he could not endure even the delay caused by the necessity of crossing the city. He sat tensely on the edge

of the seat, and his nervous twitching grew worse by the minute.

When finally he reached his destination, he could not hold the money for his fare. He dropped the plastic tokens on the floor and left the driver to scramble for them.

He stood for a moment, looking up at the ivory facade before him. It was perfectly plain, the epitome of expensive unpretentiousness. Above the door, in small letters of greenish silver, was the one Martian word: SHANGA.

"The return," he translated. "The going back." A strange and rather terrible smile crossed his face, very briefly. Then he opened the door and went inside.

Subdued lighting, comfortable lounges, soft music, the perfect waiting room. There were half a dozen men and women there, all Terrans. They wore the fashionably simple white tunic of the Trade Cities, which set off the magnificent blaze of their jewelry and the exotic styles in which they dressed their hair.

Their faces were pallid and effeminate, scored with the haggard marks of life lived under the driving tension of a super-modern age.

A Martian woman sat in an alcove, behind a glassite desk. She was dark, sophisticatedly lovely. Her costume was the artfully adapted short robe of ancient Mars, and she wore no ornament. Her slanting topaz eyes regarded Burk Winters with professional pleasantness, but deep in them he could see the scorn and the pride of a race so old that the Terran exquisites of the Trade Cities were only crude children beside it.

"Captain Winters," she said. "How nice to see you again."

He was in no mood for conventional pleasantries. "I want to see Kor Hal," he said. "Now."

"I'm afraid . . ." she began. Then she took another look at Winters' face and turned to the intercom. Presently she said, "You may go in."

He pushed open the door that led into the interior of the building, which consisted almost entirely of a huge solarium. Glassite walls enclosed it. Around the sides were many small cells, containing only a padded table. The roofs of the cells were quartz, and acted as mammoth lenses.

Skirting the solarium on the way to Kor Hal's office, Winters' mouth twisted with contempt as he looked through the transparent wall.

An exotic forest blossomed there. Trees, ferns, brilliant flowers, soft green sward, a myriad of birds. And through this mock-primitive playground wandered the men and women who were devotees of Shanga.

They lay first on the padded tables and let the radiation play with them. Winters knew. Neuro-psychic therapy, the doctors called it. Heritage of the lost wisdom of old Mars. Specific for the jangled nerves and overwrought emotions of modern man, who lived too fast in too complex an environment.

You lie there and the radiation tingles through you. Your glandular balance tips a little. Your brain slows down. All sorts of strange and pleasant things happen inside of you, while the radiation tinkers with nerves and reflexes and metabolism. And pretty soon you're a child again, in an evolutionary sort of way.

SHANGA, the going-back. Mentally, and just a tiny bit physically, back to the primitive, until the effect wore off and the normal balance restored itself. And even then, for a while, you felt better and happier, because you'd had one hell of a rest, from everything.

Their pampered white bodies incongruously clad in skins and bits of coloured cloth, the Earthlings of Kahora played and fought among the trees, and their worries were simple ones concerning food and love and strings of gaudy beads.

Hidden away out of sight were watchful men with shock guns. Sometimes someone went a little bit too far down the road. Winters knew. He had been knocked cold himself, on his last visit here. He remembered that he had tried to kill a man.

Or rather, he had been told that he had tried to kill a man. One did not remember much of the interludes of Shanga. That was one reason people liked it. One was free of inhibitions.

Fashionable vice, made respectable by the cloak of science. It was a new kind of excitement, a new kind of escape from the glittering complexities of life. The Terrans were mad for it.

But only the Terrans. The barbaric Venusians were still too close to the savage to have any need for it, and the Martians were too old and wise in sin to use it. *Besides*, thought Winters, *they made Shanga. They know.*

A deep shudder ran through him as he thrust his way into the office of Kor Hal, the director.

Kor Hal was lean and dark and of no particular age. His national origin was lost in the anonymity of the conventional white tunic. He was Martian, and his courtesy was only a velvet sheath over chilled steel, but beyond that he was quantity X.

"Captain Winters," he said. "Please sit down."

Winters sat.

Kor Hal studied him. "You're nervous, Captain Winters. But I am afraid to treat you anymore. Atavism lies too close to the surface in you." He shrugged. "You remember the last time."

Winters nodded. "The same thing happened in N'York." He leaned forward. "I don't want you to treat me anymore. What you have here isn't enough now. Sar Kree told me that, in N'York. He told me to come to Mars."

Kor Hal said quietly, "He communicated with me."

"Then you will . . ." Winters broke off, because there were no words with which to finish his question.

Kor Hal did not answer. He reclined at ease against the cushions of his lounge chair, handsome, unconcerned. Only his eyes, which were green and feral, held a buried spark of amusement. The cruel amusement of a cat which has a crippled mouse under its paw.

"Are you sure," he asked finally, "that you know what you're doing?"

"Yes."

"People differ, Captain Winters. Those mannikins out there—" he indicated the solarium—"have neither blood nor heart. They are artificial products of an artificial environment. But men like you, Winters, are playing with fire when they play with Shanga."

"Listen," said Winters. "The girl I was going to marry took her flier out over the desert one day and never came back. God only knows what happened to her. You

know better than I do the things that can happen to people in the dead sea bottoms. I hunted for her. I found her flier, where it had crashed. I never found her. After that nothing mattered much to me. Nothing but forgetting."

Kor Hal inclined his dark, narrow head. "I remember. A tragedy, Captain Winters. I knew Miss Leland, a lovely young woman. She used to come here."

"I know," said Winters. "She wasn't Trade City, really, but she had too much money and too much time. Anyway, I'm not worried about playing with your fire, Kor Hal. I've been burned too deep with it already. Like you say, people differ. Those lily-whites in their toy jungle, they have no desire to go back any farther. They haven't the guts or the passions to want to. I have."

Winters' eyes blazed with a peculiarly animal light. "I want to go back, Kor Hal. Back as far as Shanga will take me."

"Sometimes," said the Martian, "that's a long way."

"I don't care."

Kor Hal gave him an intent look. "For some, there is no return."

"I have nothing to return to."

"It is not easy, Winters. Shanga — the real Shanga, of which these solariums and quartz lenses are only a weak copy, was forbidden centuries ago by the City-States of Mars. There are risks, and discomforts, which means that the process is expensive."

"I have money." Winters leaped up suddenly, his control breaking. "Be damned to your arguments! They're all hypocrisy, anyway. You know perfectly well which ones are going to take to Shanga. You keep them coming until they're addicts, half crazy to feel the real thing, and you know damn well you're going to give them what they want as soon as they cross your dirty palm with silver."

He tossed a checkbook on Kor Hal's desk. The top one was blank, but signed.

"There," he said. "Anything up to a hundred-thousand Universal Credits."

"I would prefer," said Kor Hal, "that you draw your own check, to cash." He handed the checkbook back to Winters. "The full amount, in advance."

Burk Winters said one word. "When?"
 "Tonight, if you wish. Where are you staying?"

"The Tri-Planet."

"Have dinner there as usual. Then remain in the bar. Sometime during the evening your guide will join you."

"I'll be waiting," Winters said, and went out.

Kor Hal smiled. His teeth were very white, very sharp. They had the hungry look of fangs.

II

BURK WINTERS GOT HIS BEARINGS finally when Phobos rose, and he could guess where they were heading.

They had slipped quietly out of Kahora, he and the slender young Martian who had joined him unobtrusively in the Tri-Planet bar. A flier waited for them on a private field. Kor Hal waited also. They took off, with a fourth man, who looked to be one of the big barbarians from the northern hills of Kesh. Kor Hal took the controls.

Winters was sure now that they were bound for the Low Canals. The ancient waterways and the ancient wicked towns — Jekkara, Valkis, Barrakesh — outside the laws of the scattered City-States. Thieves' market, slave market, vice market of a world. Earthmen were warned to keep away from them.

Miles reeled behind them. The utter desolation of the landscape below got on Winters' nerves. The silence in the flier became unendurable. There was something menacing about it. Kor Hal and the big Keshi and the slim young man seemed to be nursing some common inner thought that gave them a peculiarly vicious pleasure. Its shadow showed on their faces.

Winters spoke finally. "Are your headquarters out here?"

No answer.

Winters said rather petulantly, "There's no need to be so secretive. After all, I'm one of you now."

The slim young man said sharply, "Do the beasts lie down with the masters?"

Winters started to bristle, and the barbarian put his hand on the wicked little sap he carried at his belt. Then Kor Hal spoke coolly.

"You wished to practise Shanga in its true form, Captain Winters. That is what you have paid for. That is what you will receive. All else is irrelevant."

Winters shrugged sulkily. He sat smoking his sedative tobacco, and he did not speak again.

After a long, long time the seemingly endless desert began to change. Low ridges rose naked from the sand and grew into a mountain range, of which nothing was left now but the barren rock.

Beyond the mountains lay a dead sea bottom. It stretched away under the moonlight, dropping, always dropping, until at last it became only a vast pit of darkness. Ribs of chalk and coral gleamed here and there, pushing through the lichens like bones through the dried skin of a man long dead.

Winters saw that there was a city between the foothills and the sea.

It had followed the receding water down the slopes. From this height, Winters could see the outlines of five harbours, abandoned one by one as the sea drew back, the great stone docks still standing. Houses had been built to fill their emptiness, and then abandoned in their turn for a lower level.

Now the straggling town had coalesced along the bank of the canal that drew what feeble life was left from the buried springs of the bottom. There was something infinitely sad about that thin dark line — all that was left of a blue and rolling ocean.

The flier circled and came down. The Keshi said something rapidly in his own dialect, from which Winters caught the one word, *Valkis*. Kor Hal answered him. Then he turned to Winters and said,

"We have not far to go. Stay close by me."

The four men left the flier. Winters knew that he was under guard, and felt that it was not entirely for the sake of protecting him.

THE WIND blew thin and dry. Dust rose in clouds around their feet. Valkis lay ahead, a stony darkness sprawling upward toward the cliffs, cold in the eerie light of the twin moons. Winters saw, high up on the crest, the broken towers of a palace.

They walked beside still black water, on paving stones worn hollow by the sandalled feet of countless generations. Even at this late hour, Valkis did not sleep. Torches burned yellow against the night. Somewhere a double-banked harp made strange music. The streets, the alley mouths, the doorways and the flat roofs of the houses rustled with life.

Lithe lean men and catlike women watched the strangers, hot-eyed and silent. And over all, Winters heard the particular sound of the Low-Canal towns—the whispering and chiming of the wanton little bells that the women wear, braided into their dark hair, hanging from their ears, chained around their ankles.

Evil, that town. Ancient, and very evil, but not tired. Winters could feel the pulse of life that beat there, strong and hot. He was afraid. His own civilian garb and the white tunics of his companions were terribly conspicuous in this place of bare breasts and bright kilts and jeweled girdles.

No one molested them. Kor Hal led the way into a large house and shut the door of beaten bronze behind them, and Winters felt a great relief. He turned to Kor Hal.

"How soon?" he asked, and tried to conceal the trembling of his hands.

"Everything is ready, Winters. Halk, show him the way."

The Keshi nodded and went off, with Winters at his heels.

This was very different from the Hall of Shanga in Kahora. Within these walls of quarried stone, men and women had lived and loved and died in violence. The blood and tears of centuries had dried in the cracks between the flags. The rugs, the tapestries, and the furnishings were worth a fortune as antiques. Their beauty was worn, but still bright.

At the end of a corridor was a bronze door, pierced by a narrow grille.

Halk stopped. He said to Winters, "Strip."

Winters hesitated. He carried a gun, and he did not like to leave it behind. "Why out here? I'd rather have my clothes with me."

Halk said, "Strip here. It is the rule."

Winters obeyed.

He walked naked into the narrow cell.

There was no comfortable table here, only a few skins thrown on the bare floor. A barred opening showed darkly in the opposite wall.

The bronze door rang shut behind him and he heard the great bar drop into place. It was completely dark. He was really afraid, now. Terribly afraid. But it was too late for that. It had been too late, for a long time.

Ever since Jill Leland was lost.

HE lay down on the hides. High above, in the vault of the roof, he could make out a faint, vague shimmering. It grew brighter. Presently he saw that it was a prism set into the stone, rather large and cut from a crystalline substance that was the colour of fire.

Kor Hal's voice reached him through the grille. "Earthman!"

"Yes?"

"That prism is one of the Jewels of Shanga. The wise men of Caer Dhu carved them half a million years ago. Only they knew the secret of the substance, and the shaping of the facets. There are only three of the jewels left."

Sparks that were more energy than light flickered on the stone walls of the cell. Gold and orange and greenish blue. Little flames, the fire of Shanga, to burn the heart.

Because he was afraid, Winters said, "But the radiation, the ray that comes through the prism. Is it the same as that in Kahora?"

"Yes. The secret of the projectors was lost also with Caer Dhu. Presumably they use cosmic rays. By substituting ordinary quartz for the prisms, we could make the radiation weak enough for our purpose in the Trade Cities."

"Who is 'we,' Kor Hal?"

Laughter, soft and wicked. "Earthman—*we* are Mars!"

Dancing fire, growing, growing, glinting on his flesh, darting through his blood, his brain. It was not like this in the solariums, with their pretty trees. It was pleasure there, tantalizing, heady pleasure. It was exciting, and strange. But this . . .

His body began to move, to arch itself into strong writhing curves. He thought he could not endure the lovely, lovely pain.

Kor Hal's voice boomed down some huge fateful distance. "The wise men of Caer Dhu were not so wise. They found the secret of Shanga, and they escaped their wars and their troubles by fleeing backward along the path of evolution. Do you know what happened to them? They perished, Earthman! In one generation, Caer Dhu vanished from the face of Mars." It was getting hard to answer, hard to think. Winters said hoarsely, "Did it matter? They were happy, while they lived."

"Are you happy, Earthman?"

"Yes!" he panted. "Yes!"

The words were only half articulate. Twisting, rolling on the hide rugs, in the grip of such magnificent, unholy sensation as he had never dreamed of before, Burk Winters was happy. The fire of Shanga blazed down upon him like a wicked sun, and all his troubles were melting away, and there was nothing left but joy.

Again, Kor Hal laughed.

AFTER THAT, Winters was not sure of anything. His mind rocked, and there were periods of darkness. When he was conscious, he knew only a feeling of *strangeness*. But he carried one memory with him, at least part way down that eerie road.

During a lucid period, a space of only a minute or two, he thought that one of the stones had rolled back to reveal a quartzite screen, and that through the screen a face looked at him, watching as he bathed naked in the beautiful flame.

A woman's face. Martian, high-bred, with strong delicate bones and arrogant brows, and a red mouth that would be like a bitter-sweet fruit to kiss. Her eyes were golden as the fire, and as hot, and proud, and scornful.

There must have been a microphone in the wall, for she spoke and he heard her voice, full of a sweet cruel magic. She called his name. He could not rise, but he managed to crawl toward her, and to his reeling brain she was part of the unearthly force that played with him. A destruction and a fascination, as irresistible as death.

To his alien eyes, she was not as lovely as Jill. But there was a power in her. And her red mouth taunted him, and the curve

of her bare shoulders drove him to madness.

"You're strong," she said. "You will live, until the end. And that is well, Burk Winters."

He tried to speak, but he could no longer form the words.

She smiled. "You have challenged me, Earthman. I know. You've challenged Shanga. You're brave, and I like brave men. You're also a fool, and I like fools, because they give me sport. I'm looking forward, Earthman, to the moment when you reach the end of your search!"

He tried again to speak, and failed, and then the night and the silence came to stay. He took the sound of her mocking laughter with him into the dark.

HE did not think of himself now as Captain Burk Winters, but only by the short personal name of Burk. The stones upon which he lay were cold and hard. It was pitch dark, but his eyes and ears were very keen. He could tell by the sound of his breathing that he was in a closed space, and he did not like it.

A low growl rumbled in his throat. The hairs stiffened at the back of his neck. He tried to remember how he had come here. Something had happened, something to do with fire, but he did not know what, or why.

Only one thing he knew. He was searching for something. It was gone, and he wanted it back. The wanting was a pain in him. He could not remember what the object was that he wanted, but the need for it was greater than any obstacle short of death.

He rose and began to explore his prison.

Almost at once he found an opening. Cautious testing told him that there was a passage beyond. He could see nothing, but the air that blew in to him was very heavy with strange smells. Instinct told him that it was a trap. He crouched irresolute, his hands opening and closing in desire for a weapon. There was no weapon. Presently he went into the passage, moving without sound.

He went a long way, his shoulders brushing stone on either side. Then he saw light ahead, red and flickering, and the air brought him the taint of smoke, and the smell of man.

Very, very slowly, the creature called Burk padded toward the light.

He came close to the end of the tunnel, and suddenly a barred gate dropped behind him with a ringing clash. He could not go back.

He did not wish to go back. Enemies were in front of him, and he wished to fight. He knew now that he could not come upon them secretly. Flexing his great chest, he leaped out boldly from the tunnel mouth.

The tossing glare of torches dazzled his eyes, and a wild mob howl deafened him. He stood alone on a great block—the old slave block of Valkis, though he did not know that. Men and women thronged the square, leaving a wide open space around the block. They stared up, jeering at the Earthman who had tasted the forbidden fruit that even the soulless men of the Low Canals would not touch.

The creature called Burk was still a man, but a man already shadowed by the ape. During the hours he had bathed in the light of Shanga, he had changed physically. Bone and flesh had altered under the accelerated urging of glands and increased metabolism.

Already a big, powerful man, he had thickened and coarsened along lines of brutish strength. His jaw and brow ridges jutted. Thick hair covered his chest and limbs and extended in a rudimentary mane down the back of his neck. His deep-set eyes had a hard and cunning gleam of intelligence, but it was the intelligence of the primitive mind that had learned to speak and make fire and weapons, and no more than that.

Half crouching, he glared down at the crowd. He did not know who these men were, he hated them. They were of another tribe, and their very smell was alien. They hated him, too. The air bristled with their enmity.

His gaze fell on a man who stepped out lightly and proudly into the empty space. He did not remember that this man's name was Kor Hal. He did not notice that Kor Hal had shed the white tunic of the Trade Cities for the kilt and girdle of the Low Canals, nor that he wore in his ears the pierced gold rings of Barrakesh, and was now honestly himself—a bandit, born and bred among a race of

bandits who had been civilized for so long that they could afford to forget it.

Burk knew only that this man was his particular enemy.

"Captain Burk Winters," said Kor Hal. "Man of the tribe of Terra—lords of the spaceways, builders of the Trade Cities, masters of greed and rapine."

His voice carried over the packed square, though he did not shout. Burk watched him, his eyes like blinking red sparks in the torchlight, weaving slightly on his feet, his hands swinging loose and hungry. He did not understand the words, but they were threat and insult.

"Look at him, Oh men of Valkis!" cried Kor Hal. "He is our master now. His government kings it over the City-States of Mars. Our pride is stripped, our wealth is gone. What have we left, oh children of a dying world?"

The answer that rang from the walls of Valkis was soft and wordless, the opening chord of a hymn written in hell.

Someone threw a stone.

BURK came down off the slave block in a great effortless spring and sped across the square, straight for Kor Hal's throat.

A laugh went up, mirth that was half a cat-scream of sheer savagery. Like one supple creature, the crowd moved. Torchlight flashed from knife-blades and jewels and eyes of glittering green and topaz, and the small chiming bells, and the points of the deadly spiked knuckle-dusters. Long black tongues of whips licked out with a hiss and a crack.

Kor Hal waited until Burk almost reached him. Then he bent and pivoted in the graceful Martian savatte. His foot caught Burk under the chin and sent him sprawling.

As he rolled half stunned, Kor Hal caught a whip from a man's hand.

"That's it, Earthman!" he cried out. "Grovel! Belly down, and lick the stones that were here before the apes of Earth had learned to walk!"

The long lash sang and bit, lacing the hairy body with red weals, and the harsh mob scream went up—*Drive him! Drive the beast of Shanga, as the invading beasts of old were driven by our forefathers!*

And they drove him, with whip and knife and spike, through the streets of Valkis under the racing moons. Jeering, they drove him.

He fought them. Mad with fury, he fought them, but he could not come to grips with them. When he lunged they melted before him, and each way he turned he was met by the lash and the blade and the crippling kick. Blood ran, but it was all his own, and the high shrill laughter of women pursued him as he went.

He wanted to kill. The lust of killing was more red and strong within him than his blood. But he reeled under the pain of many blows, and his sight was dim, and where his great hands closed on flesh to tear it, he was himself torn and driven back, dragged down by the lashes curled around his throat.

At last there was only fear and the desire to escape.

They let him run. Along the crumbling ways of Valkis, up and down the twisting alleys that reeked of ancient crime, they let him run. But not too far. They blocked him off from the canal and the freedom of the sea bottom beyond. Again and again they headed the panting, shambling creature that had been Burk Winters, captain of the *Starflight*, and drove it higher up the slope.

Burk moved slowly now. He snarled and his head wove blindly from side to side in a pathetic attempt at defiance. His blood dripped hot on the stones. And always the insolent stinging lashes drove him on.

Up and up. Past the great looming docks, with the bollards and the scars of moored ships still on them, and the dust of their own decay lapping dry around their feet. Four levels above the canal. Four harbours, four cities, four epochs written in fading characters of stone. Even the dawn-man Burk was oppressed and frightened.

There was no life here. There had been no life for a long time, even in the lowest level. The wind had scoured and polished the empty houses, smoothing the corners to roundness, hollowing the doors and windows, until the work of man was almost erased. Only strange things were left, that looked as though the wind had

made them by itself out of little mountain tops.

The people of Valkis were silent now. They drove the beast, and their hate had not abated, but was intensified.

They walked here upon the very bones of their world. Earth was a green star, young and rich. Here the Martians passed the marble pier where the Kings of Valkis had moored their galleys, and the very marble was shattered under the heel of time.

High on the ridge above the oldest city the palace of the kings looked down at the scourging of the interloper. And in all of Valkis now there was no sound but the whispering of little bells that was like the sigh of wind on another world, where the women ran on their small bare feet, ankle deep in dust.

BURK climbed apelike up the history of Mars. His belly was cold with a terror of these dark places that smelled of nothing, not even of death.

He passed a place where houses had been built within the curve of a coral reef. He clambered over the reef, and saw above him a sloping face of rock with gaping holes that the sea had made. He climbed that, not knowing or caring what it was.

On the level space above he passed the broken quays that had once made safe mooring in the bay, and stopped to look back.

They were still hunting him. His flanks heaved and his eyes were desperate. He went on, scrambling up steep narrow streets where the paving blocks had fallen out and the houses had come down in shapeless heaps, and his hands and feet left red prints where he put them down.

Then, at last, he was at the top of the ridge.

The great bulk of the palace loomed above him against the sky. Primitive wisdom told him the place was dangerous. He skirted the high wall of marble that ringed it, and suddenly his twitching nostrils caught the scent of water.

His tongue was swollen in his mouth, his throat choked with dust. His need was so great, with the salt bleeding and the fever of his wounds, that he forgot his enemies and the menace of the moun-

tain-thing behind the wall. Breaking into a ragged lope, he went forward along the cliff top until he came to a gateway, and plunged through it, and suddenly there was turf under his feet, soft and cool. There were shrubs, and flowers pale in the moonlight, heavily sweet, and dark branches against the sky.

The gate closed silently behind him. He did not see it. He ran down a grassy ride between rows of trees trimmed into fantastic shapes, guided by the smell of water. Here and there were strange gleams and glints of statuary, wrought in marble and semi-precious stones. Burk's skin crawled with an awareness of danger, but he was too weary and too mad with thirst to care.

The ride ended. Beyond was an open space, and in the centre of it was a great stunken tank, carved and ornamented. The water in it was like polished jet.

Nothing stirred in the open. A wing of the palace rose beyond the tank like a black wall, and it seemed that nothing lived there, but Burk's hair-trigger nerves told him otherwise. He stopped in the shelter of the trees, sniffing the air and listening.

Nothing. Darkness and silence. Burk looked at the waiting water. It filled all his senses. Suddenly he ran toward it.

He flung himself belly down on the slabs of turquoise that paved the brink and buried his face in the icy water and drank. Then he lay there panting, utterly spent.

Still nothing moved.

THEN, all at once, a long howl rose on the night, from somewhere beyond the palace wing. Burk stiffened. He got to his hands and knees, every hair on his body bristling with fear.

The howl was answered by a strange reptilian scream.

Now that he had satisfied his thirst, the night wind brought him many odours. They were too numerous and tangled to be identified, except for a strong musky taint that made his flesh crawl with instinctive loathing. He did not know what sort of creature gave off that taint, but it filled him with horror, because it seemed that he *almost knew*—and did not want to.

He wanted only to get away from that

place, that was so full of secret life and hidden menace and silence.

He began to move toward the trees, back the way he had come. Slowly, because he was wounded and very weak. And then, quite suddenly, he saw her.

She had come without sound into the open space, out of the shelter of huge flowering shrubs. She stood not far away, in the shifting glow of the little racing moons, watching him. She was shy and large-eyed, poised for flight. The hair that hung down her back and the shining down that covered her body were the colour of the moonlight.

Burk stopped. A tremor went through him. All his sense of loss and his desperate searching came back to him, and with them a desire to be closer to this slender she.

A name spoke itself from some dim chamber of his soul. "Jill?"

She started. He thought she was going to run away, and he cried out again, "Jill!" Then, step by step, uncertainly, she came nearer, lovely as a fawn in spring.

She made a questioning sound, and he answered. "Burk." She stood still for a moment, repeating the word, and then she whimpered and began to run toward him, and he was filled with a great joy. He laughed and mouthed her name over and over, and there were tears in his eyes. He reached out toward her.

A spear flashed and fell quivering between them.

She gave him a cry of warning and fled, vanishing into the shrubbery. Burk tried to follow, but his knees gave under him. He turned, snarling.

Tall Keshi guards in resplendant harness had come out of the trees, circling behind him. They carried spears and a net of heavy ropes. In a moment he was surrounded. The spear-points pricked him back until the net was thrown, and he went down helpless.

As they carried him away, he heard two things. The wail of the silver she, and from somewhere nearby, a woman's mocking laughter.

He had heard that laughter before. He could not remember where, or how, but it filled him with such fury that he was finally knocked over the head with a spearbutt, to keep him quiet.

III

HE CAME TO HIMSELF—the self that was Captain Burk Winters—in a room that was much like the one he last remembered, in Valkis, except that the walls were of a dark green rock and there was no prism.

Winters could not remember nothing of what had happened since that last room, except that he knew he had had a strong emotional shock. Jill's name was uppermost in his mind. He began to tremble with a deep excitement.

He got to his feet, and it was then that he realized he was shackled. Chains ran from cuffs on his wrists to similar cuffs on his ankles, passing through rings on a metal belt around his waist. These constituted his entire clothing. He saw also that there freshly healed scars on his body.

The heavy door was opened for him before he could begin to pound on it. Four tall barbarians, their harness magnificent with jewels and wrought metal, formed up a guard around him, and an officer led the way. They did not speak to Winters, and he knew the uselessness of trying to get anything out of them.

He had not the faintest idea where he was, or how he had come there, beyond a vague memory of pain and flight that was like something he had dreamed.

And somewhere, during that dream, he had seen Jill, spoken to her. He was as certain of that as he was of the weight of his chains.

He stumbled, because his sight was blurred with tears. Up to then, he had not been sure. He had seen the twisted wreck of her flier, and while he did not believe it, there was always the chance that she might really be dead, and lost to him beyond all hope.

Now he knew. She was alive, and if Winters had been alone he would have wept like a child.

Instead, he studied the corridors and the great halls through which the guard took him. From the size and the splendour of them he knew that he was in a palace, and guessed that it might be the one he had seen on the cliffs above Valkis. This was confirmed when he caught a glimpse of the town through a window embrasure.

The palace was older than anything

he had seen on Mars, except for the buried ruins of Lhak in the northern deserts. But this was no ruin. It had grown old in sombre beauty. The patterns of the mosaic floors were blurred, the precious stones worn thin as porcelain. The tapestries, preserved by the wonderful Martian formula that had been lost for centuries, like everything else on Mars, had grown frail and brittle, their colours all softened to faint glows, infinitely sad and lovely.

Here and there, on the walls or the soaring vault of a roof, were murals—magnificent pageants of lost glory, dim as an old man's memory. The seas they pictured were deep and blue, and the ships were tall, and the mail of the warriors was set with gems, and the captive queens were beautiful as dusky pearls.

Proud architecture, mating beauty with strength, and showing that strange blend of culture and barbarism that is so typically Martian. Winters reflected on how long ago these stones had been quarried, and went on to reflect that at that time civilization had already destroyed itself in a series of atomic wars, and the proud Kings of Valkis were only bandit chieftains in a world that was slipping downward toward the night.

They came at length to doors of beaten gold that were more than twice Burk's six-foot height. The Keshi guards who stood there pushed them wide, and Burk saw the throne room.

Westering sunlight slanted in from the high embrasures, falling across the pillars and the tessellated floor. The pale light touched vagrant glints from the shields and the weapons of dead kings, warmed the old banners to brief life. Everywhere else in that vast place was a brooding darkness, full of whispers and small faint echoes.

A shaft of cool gold fell directly upon the throne at the far end of the room.

The high seat itself was cut from a single block of black basalt, and as Winters approached it, his swinging chains making a loud sound in the silence, he saw that the stone had been already half shaped by the sea. It was very worn and smooth with the patient sanding of the tides, and where hands had lain on the arm-pieces there were deep hollows, and on the basalt step below.

An old woman sat upon the throne. She was wrapped in a black cloak, and her hair wound into a sort of white crown on her head, braided with jewels. She stared with half-blind eyes at the Earthman, and suddenly she spoke, in sonorous High Martian, a tongue as antique on Mars as Sanskrit is on Earth. Winters could not understand one word of it, but he knew from her tone and expression that she was quite mad.

Someone sat in the heavy shadows by her feet, outside the shaft of sunlight, and veiled by it from Winter's sight. He could catch only a vague pallor of ivory-tinted flesh, but for some reason his nerves tingled with premonition.

As he neared the high seat, the old woman rose and stretched out her arm toward him, a wrinkled Cassandra crying doom upon his head. The wild echoes of her voice rolled from the vaulted roof, and her eyes were full of a blazing hate.

The guards set the butts of their spears into his back so that he was thrown face down before the basalt step. A low, sweet, mocking laugh came out of the shadows, and he felt the pressure of a little sandalled foot on his neck.

He knew the voice that said, "Greeting, Captain Winters! The throne of Valkis welcomes you."

THE FOOT was withdrawn from his neck. He rose. The old woman had fallen back onto the throne. She was intoning what sounded like a church litany, and her upturned face had an exalted look.

The remembered voice said out of the dimness, "My mother is repeating the coronation rites. Presently she will demand the year's tribute from the Outer Islands and the coastal tribes. Time and reality do not bother her, and it pleases her to play at being queen. Therefore, as you see, I, Fand, rule Valkis from the shadow of the throne."

"Sometimes," Winters said, "You must come into the light."

"Yes."

A soft, quick rustle and she was standing there in the shaft of sunlight. Her hair was the colour of night after moonset, intricately coiled. She was dressed in the old, arrogant fashion of the bandit kingdoms—the long full skirt slit to the waist

at the sides, so that her thighs showed when she moved, the wide jeweled girdle, collar of golden plaques. Her small, high breasts were bare and lovely, her body slender, with a catlike grace.

Her face was as he remembered it. Proud and fine, golden-eyed, a mouth like a red fruit that mingled honey and poison, a lazy, slumbrous power behind the beauty, the fascination of all things that are at once beautiful and deadly.

She looked at Winters and smiled. "So at last you have reached the end of your search."

He looked down at his chains and his nakedness. "A strange way to reach it. I paid Kor Hal well for this privilege." He gave her a searching glance. "Do you rule Shanga, as well as Valkis? If so, you're not very courteous to your guests."

"On the contrary, I treat them very well—as you shall see." Her golden eyes taunted him. "But you didn't come here to practice Shanga, Captain Winters."

"Why else would I have come?"

"To find Jill Leland."

He was not really surprised. Subconsciously he had known that she knew. But he managed a look of blank amazement.

"Jill Leland is dead."

"Was she, when you saw her in the garden, and spoke to her?" Fand laughed. "Do you think we're such fools? Everyone who comes to the Hall of Shanga in the Trade Cities is carefully checked and examined. We were particularly careful with you, Captain Winters, because psychologically you were the wrong type to be drawn to Shanga. Men like you are too strong to need escape."

"You knew, of course, that your fiancee had taken up the practice. You didn't like it, and tried to make her stop. Kor Hal said that she was terribly upset about it on several occasions. But Jill had gone too far to stop. She begged to be allowed the full power, the real Shanga. She helped us plan her supposed death in the sea bottom. We would have done that anyway, for our own protection, since the girl has influential connections and we can't afford to have people hunting for our clients. But she wanted you to believe that she was dead, so that you would forget her. She felt she had no right to marry you, that she would ruin your life."

Doesn't that touch you, Captain Winters? Doesn't that bring tears to your eyes?"

It brought more than that to Winters. It brought an overpowering urge to take this lovely she-devil between his hands and break her and then stamp the pieces into the earth.

His chains made one harsh jangling sound, and then the spears came up and touched his flesh with sharp red kisses. He stood still and said,

"Why have you done this? Is it for money, or for hate?"

"For both, Earthman! And for something more important than either of them." Her lips curved in brief amusement. "Besides, I've done nothing to your people. I built the Halls of Shanga, yes. But the men and women of Earth degrade themselves of their own free will. Come here."

She motioned him to follow her to the window. As she crossed the vast room, she said,

"You have seen part of the palace. Earth credits have rebuilt and restored the house of my fathers. The credits of apelings who wish to return to their normal state because the civilization they have forced themselves is too much for them. Look out there. Earth money has done that, too."

Winters looked out upon a sight that had almost vanished from the face of Mars. A garden, the varied and jewel-bright garden that would have belonged with a palace like this. Broad lawns of bronze green turf, formal plantings, statuary . . .

For some reason he could not quite remember, that garden gave Burk Winters a cold shuddering chill.

But the garden itself was only a part of what he saw. A small part. Beneath the window the ground sloped away into a vast bowl-shaped depression, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, and Winters looked down into an amphitheater. Ruined as it was, it was still magnificent, with tiers of seats rising like steps of hewn stone from the inner walls. He thought of how it must have looked when the games were held in the old days, with all of those thousands of places filled.

Now, in the arena, there was another garden. A wild and tangled garden, closed

in by the high protective walls that had kept the beasts from the spectators. There were trees in it, and open spaces, and he could make out moving forms among the shadows, strange forms. He could not see them clearly for the distance and the slanting light, but a chill pang struck through him, a cold breath of foreboding.

In the centre of the arena was a lake. Not a large one, and probably not deep, but there were creatures splashing in it, and he caught the faint echo of a reptilian scream. An echo he had heard before . . .

FAND was looking outward to the amphitheatre, with an odd, slow smile. Winters saw that there were people already in the lower tiers of the seats, and more of them gathering.

"What is this thing," he asked her, "that is more important than money or your hatred for the men of Earth?"

All the ancient pride of her race and house flashed out in her eyes as she answered him. He forgot his loathing of her for a moment, in his respect for her deep sincerity.

She said only one word. "Mars."

The old woman heard her and cried out from the throne. Then she flung the corner of her black mantel over her head and was silent.

"Mars," said Fand quietly. "The world that could not even die in decency and honour, because the carrion birds came flying to pick its bones, and the greedy rats suck away the last of its blood and pride."

Winters said. "I don't understand. What has Shanga to do with Mars?"

"You'll see." She turned on him suddenly. "You challenged Shanga, Earthman, just as your people have challenged Mars. We'll find out which is the stronger!"

She motioned to the officer of the guard, who went away. Then she said to Winters,

"You wanted your girl back. You were willing to go through the fire of Shanga for her, though you abhorred it. You were willing to risk your identity through the changes of the ray—which after a while, Earthman, never go away. And all for Jill Leland. Do you still want her back?"

"Yes."

"You're sure of that."

"Yes."

"Very well." Fand glanced over his shoulder and nodded. "There she is."

For a long moment, Burk Winters did not turn around.

Fand moved away a little, watching, with a cruel, amused interest. Winters' back stiffened. He turned.

She was there, standing in the sunlight, bewildered, frightened, a wild and shining creature out of the dawn of the world, with a rope around her neck. The guards were laughing.

Winters thought desperately, *She has not changed too much. Back to the primitive, but not yet to the ape. There is a soul still in her eyes, and the light of reason.*

Jill, Jill! How could you have done this thing?

But he understood now how she could have done it. He remembered how bitterly he had quarrelled with her over Shanga. he had thought it a stupid and childish thing, far beneath her intelligence and as degrading as any other drug. But he had not understood.

He did now. And he was filled with a deadly fear, because he understood so well.

Because he himself was now numbered among the beasts of Shanga. And beneath his horror as he looked at the creature that was Jill and yet not Jill, he was aware that in some unholy way he found her more beautiful and more alluring than he ever had before. Stripped of all the shams and the studied unconventions of society, freed of all complexity, her body strong and fleet as a doe's quivering with sensitive life . . .

It would take two of a kind. Dawn-woman, dawn-man. Strong sinew, strong passion, the guts that cities stole away . . .

Fand said, "She can still be saved, if you can find a way to do it." Then she added shrewdly, "Unless you now need someone to save *you*, Captain Winters!"

A strong shock of revulsion rocked him, but his eyes still held a strange light.

THE silver she was coming toward him. Her gaze was fixed upon him. He saw that she was drawn to him, and struggling to understand why. She did not speak, and somehow Winters' throat closed

on an aching lump, so that he too was dumb.

The guard who held her rope let her move as she would. She came close to Winters, hesitantly, as an animal does. Then she stopped and looked up into his face. Tears gathered in her wide dark eyes. Presently she whimpered, very softly, and went down on her knees at his feet.

The old woman let out a shrill cackling. Fand's eyes were like cups of molten gold.

Winters bent over and caught Jill in his arms. He lifted her to her feet and stood holding her to him, in a fury of protective possessive love. He said very softly to Fand,

"You've seen it all now. Can we go?"

She nodded. "Take them to the garden of Shanga," she said, and added, "It is almost time."

The guards took them, Burk Winters and the woman he had lost and found again, out through the great echoing halls of the palace and down the long slope of lawn to the amphitheatre.

A barred gate of heavy metal covered the mouth of a tunnel. The guards unlocked it and took off Winters' chains and thrust him inside with Jill. The gate was locked again behind them.

Holding Jill tightly by the hand, Winters went down the tunnel and came presently into the arena—into the garden of Shanga.

He stopped, blinking in the sudden light. Jill's hand tightened on his. She quivered with a tense expectancy, and her head was tilted in an attitude of listening.

He had only a moment before the gong sounded, the mellow sonorous notes that might have been calling some evil priesthood to its dark prayers. Only a moment to glimpse the trees and the shambling anthropoid forms that moved among them, to catch the rank beast taint in the air, to hear the splashing and the hissing screams from the hidden pool.

Only a moment to be filled with horror and a sick fear, to deny to himself the reality of this nightmare garden, to wish that he were blind and deaf, or better than that, dead.

In the seats above the protecting wall, rows of Martian faces looked down. They

were the faces of men and women who watch the antics of creatures in a zoo—destructive creatures for which they have a personal hatred.

Then the gong called out, and Jill leaped away, pulling him by the hand. All over the garden there was a moment of intense silence, and then there rose a devil's chorus of roaring and screaming in voices that were horribly human and even more horribly not, and close to him Jill's voice chimed in, saying over and over,

"Shanga! Shanga!"

It came to Winters in a flash, then, what Fand had meant about Mars. As Jill pulled him headlong between the trees and across the open grassy spaces, he realized that this garden of Shanga was in fact a zoo, an exhibit, where the people of Mars might come to see what manner of beast their economic conquerors were. A hot and dire shame rose in him. *Apeling, running naked through the trees, a slave to the fire of Shanga!*

He yelled at Jill to stop!

She only plunged on the harder, so that he had to fight her, setting his heels in the earth. And she turned on him snarling, saying, "Shanga!"

A great anthropoid male came rushing toward them. He had slipped back beyond speech, but ecstatic noises came out of his throat. Behind him were others, males, females, and young on the same evolutionary level. Winters and the silver she that was Jill were caught up and carried on in their tribal rush. Winters fought to get away, but it was hopeless. The wild hairy bodies walled him in.

As they approached the center of the garden they were joined by more and more, all apparently summoned by the sound of the gong. Looking at them, Winters' stomach turned over. This was Walpurgis Night, a festival of blasphemies. And he was trapped in it, inextricably joined to destruction.

The ones like Jill, who had only gone a little way as yet, were not so bad. They were human. Winters knew that he himself had been like that, and he felt no particular horror of them. But there were others. Back through all the stages of the primitive, beyond the Neanderthaler, beyond the Piltdown Man, beyond Pithecanthropus Erectus, beyond the missing

Link, back to the common ancestor.

Shapless, shambling, hairy brutes, deformed skulls and little red cunning eyes, bared teeth grinning yellow. Things that even the anthropologists had never seen or dreamed of. Things that were not human, or ape, nor any form of life that had ever been classified.

All the dark secrets of Terran evolution were laid bare in this garden, for the Martians to see. It made even Winters, the Earthman, flinch to think that bodies like that had given ultimate birth to him. What respect could the Martians have for such a race, that was still so close to its beginnings?

But he was to see more, much more, of those beginnings . . .

THE GONG struck a last booming summons. The tide of bowed hairy shoulders and flat brows and ugly things that went on all fours swept Winters and Jill out into the clearing at the center, where from the palace window he had seen the lake. A strong musky reek hung in the air. It had the same sickly taint that a snake-house does. And Winters saw that the lake was agitated by the creatures who lived there, and who were swarming out to answer the gong.

Back to the common ancestor, and beyond. Beyond the mammal, back to the gill and the scale, to the egg laid in the warm mud, to the hissing, squirming, utterly loathly ultimate!

Jill panted, "Shanga! Shanga!", looking up, and Winters felt a darkness swimming in his brain. A cold wet thing slithered between his legs, and he swayed, retching. The surface of the lake rippled, but he would not look. He could not.

Grasping Jill, he tried to batter his way through the crowd, but it was hopeless. He was caught, trapped.

Looking up, he saw the prisms that were set high overhead on long booms. He saw them start to glow, with the remembered flame.

He had reached the end, now. The end of his search for Jill Leland, the end of everything. The first sweet deadly thrill of the ray touched his flesh. He felt the waking hunger in him, the deep lust, the stirring of the beast that lay so close under his own skin. He thought of the lake,

and wondered how it would be to lie in its wetness, breathing through the gill slits that had once opened in his own flesh when he was an embryo in his mother's womb.

Because that is where I shall be, he thought. In the lake. Jill and I. And beyond the lake, what? The amoeba, and then . . . ?

He saw the royal box, whence the Kings of Valkis had watched the gladiators and the flowing blood. Fand sat there now. She leaned her slender elbows on the stone and watched, and it seemed to Winters that even at this distance he could see the smile and the scorn in her golden eyes. Kor Hal sat beside her, and the old woman, a muffled shape of black.

The fires of Shanga burned and brightened. There was a silence on the clearing now. The sounds that came, the moanings and the little whimpers, did not touch the silence. They only made it deeper. The warm glints danced on the upturned faces, glowed in the staring eyes. Each scaled or shaggy body bore a nimbus of beauty. He saw Jill standing there, reaching up toward the twin suns, a slim shaft of silver flame.

The madness already in his blood. Muscle and sinew taut with it, arching, curving. Brain clouding with a bright soft veil, forgetfulness, release. Jill and Burk, dawn-man, dawn-woman, happy while they lived, done with everything but their own love, their own satisfaction. Why not? They were both in it now, both marked with the same stamp.

Then he heard the laughter and the jeering of the Martians who were gathered to watch the shame of his world. He tore his gaze away from the wicked light and looked again into the face of Fand of Valkis, and then at Kor Hal and the thousand other faces, and a bleak and terrible expression came into his eyes.

The ranks of the crowd had broken. The beast-shapes lay upon the turf, writhing in the ecstasy of Shanga. Jill was on her hands and knees. Winters felt the strength going out of him. The lovely pain, the beautiful, wild, exultant pain . . .

He grasped Jill and began to drag her, back toward the trees, out of the circle of light.

She did not want to go. She screamed

and tore his face with her nails and kicked him, and he struck her. After that she lay limp in his arms. He kept on, stumbling over the twitching bodies, falling, crawling at last on his hands and knees. Only one thing kept him going on. Only one thing made him undergo the tortures of the damned, fighting Shanga.

That thing was the scornful, smiling face of Fand.

The touch of the ray weakened and was gone. He was safe, beyond the circle. He dragged the girl farther into the shrubbery and turned his back on the clearing because he wanted more than any drug addict could conceive of wanting to go back into the light, and he dared not look at it.

Instead, he pulled himself erect and faced the royal box. It was only pride that kept him standing. He looked straight into the distant eyes of Fand, and her clear silvery voice carried to him.

"You will go back into the fire of Shanga, Earthman. Tomorrow, or the day after—you will go."

Complete assurance there, as one is sure of the rising of the sun.

Burk Winters did not answer. He stood a moment longer, his gaze level on Fand's. Then even pride failed. He fell and lay still.

The last conscious thought of his mind was that Fand and Mars together had challenged Earth, and that it was no longer merely a matter of saving a girl from destruction.

IV

WHEN HE CAME TO, IT WAS night. Jill sat patiently beside him. She had brought him food, and while he wolfed it down she went away to fetch water in a broad cupped leaf.

He tried to talk to her, but there was a gulf between them too wide to be bridged. She seemed subdued and brooding, and would not come close to him. He had robbed her of the fire of Shanga, and she had not forgotten it.

The futility of trying to escape with her was obvious. After a while he rose and left her, and she did not try to follow.

The garden was still under the light of the low moons. Apparently the beasts of

Shanga, true to their ape heritage, were sleeping. Moving with infinite caution, Winters prowled the arena in search of a way out. A plan had taken shape in his mind. It was not much of a plan, and he knew that very probably he would be dead before morning, but he had nothing to lose. He did not even particularly care. He was a man, an Earthman, and there was an anger in him that was deeper than any fear.

The walls of the arena were smooth and high. Even an ape could not have climbed them. All the tunnels were blocked off except the one by which they had entered. He crept down it and found the barred gate impenetrable. Beyond it was a little guard fire, and two sentries.

Winters went back to the arena.

He could see no sign of a guard in the empty tiers of seats. There was no reason for one. In itself, the amphitheatre was a perfect prison, and the creatures of the garden had no wish to escape from the besotting joys of Shanga.

Whipped before he started, Winters stood glaring bitterly at the walls that held him fast. Then he caught sight of the booms from which the Shanga prisms were suspended.

Going to the nearest one, he studied it. It was high out of reach, a long metal pole that stretched from the side of the arena above the wall and, with the other one, centered the Shanga-rays over the clearing.

High out of reach. But if a man had a rope . . .

Winters went in among the trees. He found vines and creepers, and tore them away, and knotted them together. He found a small log in a deadfall, big enough to weight one end but light enough for throwing. Then he returned to the boom.

On the third cast the log went over. He drew his flimsy rope down, making a double strand. Hand over hand, praying that the vines would hold, he began to climb.

It seemed like a long way up. He felt very naked and exposed in the moonlight.

The vines held, and no challenging voice shouted at him. He clung to the boom and worked his way along it, first dropping the telltale rope. Presently he was safe among the tiered seats.



Avoiding the guard by the tunnel, he made his way out of the amphitheatre and circled out across the slope, keeping to cover where there was cover, crawling on his belly where there was none. The shifting moon-shadows helped him, because they made visibility a treacherous thing. The palace loomed above him, huge and dark, crushed under the weight of time.

Only two lights showed. One, on the ground floor, he guessed would be the guard room. The other, on the third level, was dim as though made by a single torch. That, he hoped, would be the apartment of Fand.

Up the slope and into the shelter of the palace garden, and then into the palace itself. The great half-ruined pile could not have been guarded, even if there had been reason to guard it. Paddling silently on naked feet, Winters glided through the vast empty halls, trying to keep a plan of the place straight in his mind.

His eyes were accustomed to the dark, and enough moonlight fell through the embrasures to let him see where he was going. Room and hall and corridor, smelling of dust and death, dreaming over their faded flags and broken trophies, remembering glory. Winters shivered. Something of the cold breath of eternity lived in this place.

He found a ramp, and then another, and at last on the third level he saw light, the weak flicker of it from the crack of a door.

There was no guard. That was a break. Not only because it was a difficulty eliminated, but because it confirmed his guess that Fand was a person who would want no check on her comings and goings. From the standpoint of safety in this

place, a guard would be only a useless adornment. Fand was on her own ground here. There were no enemies.

Save one.

Winters opened the door without sound. A tiring maid slept on a low couch. She did not stir as he passed. Beyond an open arch hung with heavy curtains he found the lady Fand.

She slept in a huge carved bed, the bed of the Kings of Valkis. She looked like a child lost in its hugeness. She was very beautiful. Very wicked, and most damnably beautiful.

Winters struck her, quite ruthlessly. Sleep became unconsciousness. There was no outcry. With silks and girdles he found in the room he bound and gagged her, and flung her light weight over his shoulder. Then he went back the way he had come, silently out of the palace.

It was as easy as that. He had not thought it would be easy, but it was. After all, he thought, men seldom guard against the impossible.

Phobos had gone on its careening flight around Mars, and Deimos was too low to give much light. Now carrying the unconscious Fand, now dragging her across the open spaces, Winters made his way back to the amphitheatre. In and across the tiered seats to the wall. It was a twenty-foot drop, but he made it as easy as he could on her. He didn't want her dead. Then he slid over himself, hung briefly by his fingertips, and fell into cushioning brush.

When he got his breath back he made sure that Fand was not hurt. Then he carried her swiftly into the shelter of the unholy garden. Remembering a particularly dense patch of shrubbery near the central clearing, he made for it and crept thankfully into concealment with the heir of all the Kings of Valkis.

Then he waited.

HER EYES were looking up at him in the dim light, bitter gold above the gag of scarlet silk.

"Yes," he said, "you're here, in the garden of Shanga. I brought you here. We have a bargain to talk about, Fand."

He undid the gag, keeping his hand close over her mouth lest she should cry out.

She said, "There will be no bargain between us, Earthman."

"Your life, Fand. Your life for mine, and Jill's, and the others here who can still be saved. Destroy the prisms, stop this madness, and you can live to be as old and crazy as your mother."

There was no fear in her. Unbending pride, and hatred, but no fear. She laughed.

He put his hand on her throat, his fingers reaching iron-strong around her neck. "Slim," he said. "Soft, and tender. It would snap so easily."

"Break it, then. Shanga will go on without me. Kor Hal will take over. And you, Burk Winters—you can't escape." Her teeth showed white in a taunting smile. "You'll run with the beasts. No man can break free from Shanga."

Winters nodded. "I know that," he said quietly. "Therefore I must destroy Shanga before it destroys me."

She looked at him, naked and unarmed, crouching in the brush. Once more, she laughed.

He shrugged. "Perhaps it is impossible. I won't know that until it's too late, anyway. It isn't really me I'm worried about, Fand. I could be perfectly happy running on all fours through your garden. Probably I would be perfectly happy hissing and wallowing in the lake. Now the idea sickens me, but after a touch of Shanga it would be all right. No. It isn't me that matters, nor even Jill."

"What, then?"

"Earth has its pride, too," he told her gravely. "It's a younger and cruder pride than yours. It can become pretty ruthless and obnoxious at times, I'll admit. But on the whole, Earth is a good planet, and her people are good people, and she's done more to advance the Solar System than all the other worlds put together. As an Earthman, I don't like to see my world disgraced."

He glanced up and around the amphitheatre. "I think," he went on, "that Earth and Mars can learn a lot from each other, if the fanatics on both sides will stop making trouble. You're the worst one I've ever heard of, Fand. You go even beyond fanaticism." He looked at her speculatively. "I think you're as mad right now as your mother."

She did not flare up at that, which convinced him that she was not mad at all, only twisted by the way she lived and the things she had been taught.

She said, "What do you plan to do about all this?"

"Wait. Until dawn, or perhaps later. Anyway, until you've had time to think. Then I shall give you a last chance. After that, I shall kill you."

She was smiling when he replaced the gag, and her eyes did not waver.

The hours passed. Darkness into dawn, and then into full daylight. Winters sat unmoving, his head bowed over his knees. Fand's eyes were closed, and it seemed that she slept.

The garden woke to life with the sun, and all around the dense thicket Winters heard the padding footsteps and the growling of the beasts of Shanga. The things in the shallow lake cried out, and their musky taint soured the wind. Winters shivered like a man with fever and his brooding eyes were haunted.

After a while Jill came. Animal-like she had found him, animal-like she came, slipping without sound through the brush. She would have cried out at the sight of Fand, but he silenced her. She crouched beside him, watching him. She was afraid of him and yet she could not stay away. He stroked her shoulder. It was soft and strong and trembling under his hand. Her gaze was doe-like, full of sadness and a bewildered yearning.

Winters' face became as bleak and pitiless as the barren stars that watch from outer space.

The time grew very short. Jill began to look upward toward the prisms. Winters sensed in her a growing nervousness.

He shook Fand. She opened her eyes and looked at him, and he knew what her answer would be before he asked the question.

"Well?"

She shook her head.

For the first time, Winters smiled. "I have decided," he said, "not to kill you after all."

What he did after that was done quickly and efficiently, and there was no one to see but Jill and Fand. Jill did not understand, the heiress of the Kings of Valkis understood too well.

People began to drift into the amphitheatre. Martians, coming to see a show, coming to learn contempt and loathing for the men of Earth. Winters watched them. He was still smiling.

Suddenly he turned to Jill. When he rose a few minutes later, scratched and panting, she was securely bound with strips torn from the bonds of Fand. This time she would not bathe so helplessly in the fire of Shanga.

The Martians gathered. Kor Hal came into the royal box, bringing the old woman, who leaned on his arm.

The gong sounded.

V

ONCE AGAIN, WINTERS watched the gathering of the beasts of Shanga. Hidden in the thicket, beyond the reach of the rays, he saw the hairy bodies rush and jostle toward the central clearing. He saw the shining of their drugged eyes. He heard them moan and whimper, and all over the garden the mouthing whisper went—*Shanga! Shanga!*

Jill writhed and thrashed in the agony of her desire, her cries muffled by the wad of silk he had thrust into her mouth. Winters could not bear to look at her. He knew how she was suffering. He was suffering himself.

He saw that Kor Hal was leaning forward over the edge of the wall, searching the garden. He knew what the Martian was looking for.

The last notes of the gong rang out. A silence fell on the clearing. Hairy anthropoid, shambling brute that ran on all fours, nameless creatures beyond the ape, crawling thing with wet and shining scales—all silent, all waiting.

The prisms began to glow. The beautiful wicked fire of Shanga filled the air. Burk Winters set his hand between his teeth and bit until the blood ran.

It seemed to him that he could hear a faint thin screaming, rising out of the flowering shrubs by the lake. Low, tough-stemmed shrubs that lay under the full rays of the prisms.

Shanga! Shanga!

He had to go, into the clearing, into the fiery light. He could not stand it. He

must feel again the burning touch on his flesh, the madness and the joy. He could not stay away.

In desperation he flung himself down beside Jill and clung to her, shuddering in torment.

He heard Kor Hal's voice, calling his name.

He steadied himself and rose, stepping out into the full sight of the royal box. The Martians ranged on either side watched him with interest, turning their attention momentarily from the orgy of the beasts of Shanga.

Winters said, "I'm here, Kor Hal."

The man of Barrakesh looked at him and laughed. "Why fight it, Winters? You can't keep away from Shanga."

Winters asked, "Where is your high priestess? Has she wearied of the sport?"

Kor Hal shrugged. "Who knows the mind of the Lady Fand? She comes and goes as she will." He leaned forward. "Go on, Winters! The fire of Shanga is waiting. Look how he sweats there, trying to be a man! Go on, apeling—join your brothers!"

The shrill jeering laughter of the Martians fell upon Winters with the sharpness of spears.

He stood there, naked in the sunlight, his head held stubbornly erect, and he did not move. He could not control the trembling of his limbs nor the harshness of his breathing. The sweat ran in his eyes and blinded him, and the fire of Shanga danced on the writhing bodies, and he thought he would go mad with torment, but he stood there and would not move. He thought he was going to die, but he would not move.

And the Martians watched.

Kor Hal said, "Tomorrow, then. Perhaps the next day—but you'll go, Earthman."

Winters knew that he would. He could not go through this again. If he were still alive in the garden of Shanga the next time the gong sounded, he would go with his brothers.

The fire of Shanga died at last from the prisms, and the creatures of its making lay still on the ground. The Martians sighed. The first stir of departure ran through them.

Burk Winters cried out, "Wait!"

HIS VOICE rang back from the empty upper tiers, and it brought every eye upon him. There was desperation in it, and triumph, and the anger of a man driven beyond the bounds of reason.

"Wait, you men of Mars! You came to see a show. Very well, I'll give you one. You, Kor Hal! You told me something, down there in Valkis. You told me of the men of Caer Dhu who first made Shanga, and how in one generation they were destroyed by it. One generation!"

He stepped forward, finding release for his tortured nerves in this denunciation.

"We of Earth are a young race. We're still close to our beginnings, and for that you hate and mock us, calling us apes. Very well. But that youth gives us strength. We go very slowly down the road of Shanga.

"But you of Mars are old. You have followed the circle of time a long way round, and the end is always close to the beginning. In one generation the men of Caer Dhu were gone. Our fibres are iron, but theirs were only straw.

"That's why no Martian will practice Shanga—why it was forbidden by the City-States. You don't dare to practice it, because it hurls you headlong down that road—toward your end or your beginning, who knows? But you haven't the strength to take it, and you're afraid."

A jeering, angry howl rose from the crowd. Kor Hal shouted,

"Listen to the ape! Listen to the beast we drove through the streets of Valkis!"

"Yes, listen to him!" Winters cried. "Because the Lady Fand is gone, and only the ape knows where she is!"

That silenced them, and in the quiet Winters laughed.

"Perhaps you don't believe me. Shall I tell you how I did it?" He told them, and when he was through telling he listened, while they called him liar, and he jeered in Kor Hal's face.

"Wait," he shouted. "Wait, and I'll bring her to you."

He turned and went toward the clearing. He went fast, because the beasts were already beginning to stir and rouse from their temporary stupor. He remembered from his own experience with Shanga that before consciousness returned there was a period of delirium, so that even in the

Trade City solariums the people were not turned loose until it had passed.

Threading his way between the brutish bodies, leaping over them, avoiding the touch of the scaly things, he came to the clump of flowering shrubs by the lake and crawled in among them.

He had not known. He had guessed from Kor Hal's statement that the metamorphosis was swift, but he had not known. There were some things that a man could not even guess at.

In spite of himself, he cried out. He did not want to look at the thing that lay there, did not even want to know that such a form of life had existed, or could exist. But he had to look at it. He had to go close to it, so that he might undo the silken bonds that held it to the roots of the shrubs. He had to touch it. He had to lay his hands upon its softness, lift its flaccid weight, hold its slippery squirming against his own body.

It had eyes. That was the worst of it. It had eyes, and it looked at him.

He went away from the thicket, carrying his burden. Back across the clearing, where two great males were already fighting over a she, out into the open space before the royal box, where all could plainly see.

He lifted the thing over his head, high into the sunlight.

"Here!" he shouted. "Don't you recognize her? Last of the royal house of Valkis—the Lady Fand!"

Around a portion of the wriggling anatomy that might once have been a neck, the collar of golden plaques swung shining.

For a moment he held her so, while the faces of the Martians stared like the masks of dead men and Kor Hal rose and gripped the edges of the stone. Then he laid his burden down and stepped back from it where it moved horribly across the turf.

"Look there, you Martians," he said. "That is your own beginning."

In the utter, stricken silence the old woman rose. She stood for a moment looking down, and it seemed that she was about to speak or cry out, but no sound came. Then she fell, out over the wall and down the sheer drop into the arena. She did not move again.

As though she had led them, the Martians rose with one low terrible cry and followed her. Not to death, as they dropped over the wall, but to vengeance.

WINTERS RAN. He had Jill free in a minute, dragging her away into denser cover. The mouth of the tunnel was not far distant.

The Martians swarmed in upon the clearing, and then the beasts of Shanga saw them. With roars and screams, they surged out to meet their attackers.

Knife and short sword and spiked brass knuckles against fang and claw and the powerful muscles of the brute. The scaly



creatures darted here and there, hissing, slashing with their rows of needlesharp reptilian teeth. Great hands ripped and tore, snapping bones like matchsticks, cracking skulls. And the slim blades flickered in the sunlight, bright tongues speaking death.

Vengeance was done that day in the garden of Shanga. The vengeance of Earth on Mars, and the vengeance of men upon the shame of their heritage.

Winters saw Kor Hal run his sword through the creeping horror that had been Fand, through and through again until all motion stopped. Then he shouted Winters' name.

Winters went to him.

Neither spoke. There was nothing more to say. Bare-handed, Winters went against the Martian's sword. With the nightmare carnage of the battle going on around them, they two were alone. They two had a special score to settle.

Winters took one long gash above the heart before he caught Kor Hal's arm and broke it. The Martian never whimpered. With his left hand he reached for the knife at his girdle, but it never left the sheathe. Winters laid Kor Hal backward across his knee and placed one thigh across his loins and an elbow across his throat. After a moment he dropped the broken body and went away, taking the sword.

The guards came running into the arena through the tunnel.

The fight was spreading outward from the lake. Locked in struggling, swaying knots, the beasts of Shanga slew the Martians and were slain. The waters of the lake were stained red, and the corpse of a Martian was being dragged stealthily into it from the mud of the bank. There was something hidden below the surface, something that could no longer fight on land, but only lay quietly in wait, and fed.

Now the guards had come with their long spears, and Winters knew that in the end there would not be one creature left alive in the garden. And it was well.

He took Jill's hand and led her toward the tunnel, running in the shelter of the trees. The fight was occupying everyone's attention. The brute males were

hard to kill, and they fought for the love of it. The tunnel was empty, the gate open, the guards inside the arena, hard at work. Winters and the girl fled through it, taking cover outside the amphitheatre just before another group of guards came down from the palace.

From there, with infinite haste and caution, they made their way down the cliffs through the dead ruins of Valkis, and then out across the desert, skirting the living town by the canal. Kor Hal's flier was on the field where Winters remembered it.

He thrust Jill inside, and as he followed her he saw the angry mob start to pour out of Valkis, where word of his crime and his escape had been brought, a little too late.

He took the flier up, setting a course for Kahora. And now that it was all over, he felt a great weariness and an overwhelming desire to forget the very name of Shanga.

BUT he knew that he could never forget. The golden fire had burned too deep. He knew that he would always be haunted by the beautiful face of Fand as it had looked when he shackled her in the clearing, and by the memory of the high thin screaming as the light poured down from the prisms. Even the psychos could never make him forget.

The governments of Earth and Mars would see to it now that Shanga was stamped out forever. He was glad, and a little proud, because it had been his doing. But even so . . .

He looked over at Jill. Someday, he prayed, she would be herself again. The taint of Shanga would pass her, and she would once more be the Jill Leland he had given his heart to.

But will it pass entirely? For a moment it seemed that he heard the mocking voice of Fand, speaking in his soul. *Will it pass from you, Burk Winters? Can one who has run with the beasts of Shanga ever be the same again?*

He did not know. Looking back, he saw the smoke rising from the unholy garden—and he did not know.

Jinx Ship To The Rescue

By ALFRED COPPEL, JR.



They were diving into the sun.

Stand by for T.R.S. Aphrodite, butt of the Space Navy. She's got something terrific in her guts and only her ice-cold lady engineer can coax it out of her!

BREVET LIEUTENANT COMMANDER David Farragut Strykowski III of the Tellurian Wing, Combined Solarian Navies, stood ankle deep in the viscous mud of Venusport Base and surveyed his new command with a jaundiced eye. The hot, slimy, greenish rain that drenched Venusport for two-thirds of the 720-hour day had stopped at last, but now a miasmic fog was rising

from the surrounding swampland, rolling across the mushy landing ramp toward the grounded spaceship. Visibility was dropping fast, and soon porto-sonar sets would have to be used to find the way about the surface Base. It was an ordinary day on Venus.

Strike cursed Space Admiral Gorman and all his ancestors with a wealth of feeling. Then he motioned wearily to his

companion, and together they sloshed through the mud toward the ancient monitor.

The scaly bulk of the Tellurian Rocket Ship *Aphrodite* loomed unhappily into the thick air above the two men as they reached the ventral valve. Strike raised reluctant eyes to the sloping flank of the fat spaceship.

"It looks," he commented bitterly, "Like a pregnant carp."

Senior Lieutenant Coburn Whitley—"Cob" to his friends—nodded in agreement. "That's our Lover-Girl . . . old Aphrodisiac herself. The ship with the poison personality." Cob was the *Aphrodite's* Executive, and he had been with her a full year . . . which was a record for Execs on the *Aphrodite*. She generally sent them Earthside with nervous breakdowns in half that time.

"Tell me, Captain," continued Cob curiously, "How does it happen that you of all people happened to draw this tub for a command. I thought . . ."

"You know Gorman?" queried Strykowski.

Cob nodded. "Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. Old Brass-button Gorman?"

"The same."

"Well," Cob ran a hand over his chin speculatively, "I know Gorman's a prize stinker . . . but you were in command of the *Ganymede*." And, after all, you come from an old service family and all that. How come this?" He indicated the monitor expressively.

Strike sighed. "Well, now, Cob, I'll tell you. You'll be spacing with me and I guess you've a right to know the worst . . . not that you wouldn't find it out anyway. I come from a long line of very sharp operators. Seven generations of officers and gentlemen. Lousy with tradition.

"The first David Farragut Strykowski, son of a sea-loving Polish immigrant, emerged from World War II a four-striper and Congressional Medal winner. Then came David Farragut Strykowski, Jr., and, in the abortive Atomic War that terrified the world in 1961, he won a United Nations Peace Citation. And then came David Farragut Strykowski III . . . me.

"From such humble beginnings do great traditions grow. But something happened when I came into the picture. I don't fit

with the rest of them. Call it luck or temperament or what have you.

"In the first place I seem to have an uncanny talent for saying the wrong thing to the wrong person. Gorman for example. And I take too much on my own initiative. Gorman doesn't like that. I lost the *Ganymede* because I left my station where I was supposed to be running section-lines to take on a bunch of colonists I thought were in danger . . ."

"The Procyon A people?" asked Cob.

"So you've heard about it." Strike shook his head sadly. "My tactical astrophysicist warned me that Procyon A might go nova. I left my routine post and loaded up on colonists." He shrugged. "Wrong guess. No nova. I made an ass of myself and lost the *Ganymede*. Gorman gave it to his former aide. I got this."

Cob coughed slightly. "I heard something about Ley City, too."

"Me again. The *Ganymede's* whole crew ended up in the Luna Base brig. We celebrated a bit too freely."

Cob Whitley looked admiringly at his new Commander. "That was the night after the *Ganymede* broke the record for the Centaurus B-Earth run, wasn't it? And then wasn't there something about . . ."

"Canalopolis?"

Whitley nodded.

"That time I called the Martian Ambassador a spy. It was at a Tellurian Embassy Ball."

"I begin to see what you mean, Captain."

"Strike's the name, Cob."

Whitley's smile was expansive. "Strike, I think you're going to like our old tin pot here." he patted the *Aphrodite's* nether belly affectionately. "She's old . . . but she's loose. And we're not likely to meet any Ambassadors or Admirals with her, either."

Strykowski sighed, still thinking of his sleek *Ganymede*. "She'll carry the mail, I suppose. And that's about all that's expected of her."

Cob shrugged philosophically. "Better than tanking that stinking rocket fuel, anyway. Deep space?"

Strike shook his head. "Venus-Mars."

Cob scratched his chin speculatively. "Perihelion run. Hot work."

Strike was again looking at the spaceship's unprepossessing exterior. "A surge-circuit monitor, so help me."

Cob nodded agreement. "The last of her class."

AND she was not an inspiring sight. The fantastically misnamed *Aphrodite* was a surge-circuit monitor of twenty guns built some ten years back in the period immediately preceding the Ionian Subjugation Incident. She had been designed primarily for atomics, with a surge-circuit set-up for interstellar flight. At least that was the planner's view. In those days, interstellar astrogation was in its formative stage, and at the time of the *Aphrodite's* launching the surge-circuit was hailed as the very latest in space drives.

Her designer, Harlan Hendricks, had been awarded a Legion of Merit for her, and every silver-braided admiral in the Fleet had dreamed of hoisting his flag on one of her class. There had been three. The *Artemis*, the *Andromeda*, and the prototype . . . old Aphrodisiac. The three vessels had gone into action of Callisto after the Phobos Raid had set off hostilities between the Ionians and the Solarian Combine.

All three were miserable failures.

The eager officers commanding the three monitors had found the circuit too appealing to their hot little hands. They used it . . . in some way, wrongly.

The *Artemis* exploded. The *Andromeda* vanished in the general direction of Coma Berenices glowing white hot from the heat of a ruptured fission chamber and spewing gamma rays in all directions. And the *Aphrodite's* starboard tubes blew, causing her to spend her store of vicious energy spinning like a Fourth of July pinwheel under 20 gravities until all her interior fittings . . . including crew were a tangled, pulpy mess within her pressure hull.

The *Aphrodite* was refitted for space. And because it was an integral part of her design, the circuit was rebuilt . . . and sealed. She became a workhorse, growing more cantankerous with each passing year. She carried personnel . . . She trucked ores. She ferried sketeerboats and tanked rocket fuel. Now, she would carry the mail. She would lift from Ven-

usport and jet to Canalopolis, Mars, without delay or variation. Regulations, tradition and Admiral Gorman of the Inner Planet Fleet required it. And it was now up to David Farragut Strykalski III to see to it that she did . . .

The Officer of the Deck, a trim blonde girl in spotless greys saluted smartly as Strike and Cob stepped through the valve.

Strike felt vaguely uncomfortable. He knew, of course, that at least a third of the personnel on board non-combat vessels of the Inner Planet Fleet was female, but he had never actually had women on board a ship of his own, and he felt quite certain that he preferred them elsewhere.

Cob sensed his discomfort. "That was Celia Graham, Strike. Ensign. Radar Officer. She's good, too."

Strike shook his head. "Don't like women in space. They make me uncomfortable."

Cob shrugged. "Celia's the only officer. But about a quarter of our ratings are women." He grinned maliciously. "Equal rights, you know."

"No doubt," commented the other sourly. "Is that why they named this . . . ship 'Aphrodite'?"

Whitley saw fit to consider the question rhetorical and remained silent.

Strike lowered his head to clear the arch of the flying-bridge bulkhead. Cob followed. He trailed his Captain through a jungle of chrome piping to the main control panels. Strike sank into an acceleration chair in front of the red DANGER seal on the surge-circuit rheostat.

"Looks like a drug-store fountain, doesn't it?" commented Cob.

Strykalski nodded sadly, thinking of the padded smoothness of the *Ganymede's* flying-bridge. "But she's home to us, anyway."

The thick Venusian fog had closed in around the top levels of the ship, hugging the ports and cutting off all view of the field outside. Strike reached for the squawk-box control.

"Now hear this. All officer personnel will assemble in the flying bridge at 600 hours for Captain's briefing. Officer of the Deck will recall any enlisted personnel now on liberty . . ."

Whitley was on his feet, all the slack-

ness gone from his manner. "Orders, Captain?"

"We can't do anything until the new Engineering Officer gets here. They're sending someone down from the *Antigone*, and I expect him by 600 hours. In the meantime you'll take over his part of the work. See to it that we are fueled and ready to lift ship by 602. Base will start loading the mail at 599:30. That's about all."

"Yes, sir." Whitley saluted and turned to go. At the bulkhead, he paused. "Captain," he asked, "Who is the new E/O to be?"

Strike stretched his long legs out on the steel deck. "A Lieutenant Hendricks, I. V. Hendricks, is what the orders say."

Cob thought hard for a moment and then shrugged his shoulders. "I. V. Hendricks." He shook his head. "Don't know him."

THE other officers of the *T.R.S. Aphrodite* were in conference with the Captain when Cob and the girl at his side reached the flying bridge. She was tall and dark-haired with regular features and pale blue eyes. She wore a service jumper with two silver stripes on the shoulder-straps, and even the shapeless garment could not hide the obnoxious trimness of her figure.

Strike's back was toward the bulkhead, and he was addressing the others.

"... and that's about the story. We are to jet within 28,000,000 miles of Sol. Orbit is trans-Mercurian hyperbolic. With Mars in opposition, we have to make a perihelion run and it won't be pleasant. But I'm certain this old boiler can take it. I understand the old boy who designed her wasn't as incompetent as they say. But Space Regs are specific about mail runs. This is important to you, Evans. Your astrogation has to be accurate to within twenty-five miles plus or minus the shortest route. And there'll be no breaking orbit. Now be certain that the refrigeration units are checked, Mister Wilkins, especially in the hydroponic cells. Pure air is going to be important."

"That's about all there is to tell you. As soon as our rather leisurely E/O gets here, we can jet with Aunt Nelly's postcard." He nodded. "That's the story. Lift

ship in . . ." He glanced at his wrist chronograph, ". . . in an hour and five."

The officers filed out and Cob Whitley struck his head into the room. "Captain?"

"Come in, Cob." Strike's dark brows knit at the sight of the uniformed girl in the doorway.

Cob's face was sober, but hidden amusement was kindling behind his eyes. "Captain, may I present Lieutenant Hendricks? Lieutenant I-vy Hendricks?"

Strike looked blankly at the girl.

"Our new E/O, Captain," prompted Whitley.

"Uh . . . welcome aboard, Miss Hendricks," was all the Captain could find to say.

The girl's eyes were cold and unfriendly. "Thank you, Captain." Her voice was like cracked ice tinkling in a glass. "If I may have your permission to inspect the drives, Captain, I *may* be able to convince you that the designer of this vessel was not . . . as you seem to think . . . a senile incompetent."

Strike was perplexed, and he showed it. "Why, certainly . . . uh . . . Miss . . . but why should you be so . . ."

The girl's voice was even colder than before as she said. "Harlan Hendricks, Captain, is my father."

A WEEK in space had convinced Strike that he commanded a jinx ship. Jetting sunward from Venus, the cantankerous *Aphrodite* had burned a steering tube through, and it had been necessary to go into free-fall while Jenkins, the Assistant E/O, and a damage control party effected repairs. When the power was again applied, Old *Aphrodisiac* was running ten hours behind schedule, and Strike and Evans, the Astrogation Officer, were sweating out the unforeseen changes introduced into the orbital calculations by the time spent in free-fall.

The *Aphrodite* rumbled on toward the orbit of Mercury . . .

For all the tension between the occupants of the flying-bridge, Strike and Ivy Hendricks worked well together. And after a second week in space, a reluctant admiration was replacing the resentment between them. Ivy spent whatever time she could spare tinkering with her father's

pet surge-circuit and Strike began to realize that there was little she did not know about spaceship engineering. Then, too, Ivy spent a lot of time at the controls, and Strike was forced to admit that he had never seen a finer job of piloting done by man or woman.

And finally, Ivy hated old Brass-bottom Gorman even more than Strike did. She felt that Gorman had ruined her father's career, and she was dedicating her life to proving her father right and Brass-bottom wrong. There's nothing in the cosmos to nurture friendship like a common enemy.

At 30,000,000 miles from the sun, the *Aphrodite's* refrigeration units could no longer keep the interior of the ship at a comfortable temperature. The thermometer stood at 102°F, the very metal of the ship's fittings hot to the touch. Uniforms were discarded, insignia of rank vanished. The men dressed in fiberglass shorts and spaceboots, sweat making their naked bodies gleam like copper under the sodium-vapor lights. The women in the crew added only light blouses to their shorts . . . and suffered from extra clothing.

Strike was in the observation blister forward, when Ensign Graham called to say that she had picked up a radar contact sunward. The IFF showed the pips to be the *Lachesis* and the *Atropos*. The two dreadnaughts were engaged in coronary research patrol . . . a purely routine business. But the thing that made Strike course under his breath was Celia Graham's notation that the *Atropos* carried none other than Space Admiral Horatio Gorman, Cominch Inplat.

Strike thought it a pity that old Brass-bottom couldn't fall into Hell's hottest pit . . . and he told Ivy so.

And she agreed.

OLD Aphrodisiac had reached perihelion when it happened. The thermometer stood at 135° and tempers were snapping. Cobb and Celia Graham had tangled about some minor point concerning Lover-Girl's weight and balance. Ivy went about her work on the bridge without speaking, and Strike made no attempt to brighten her sudden depression. Lieutenant Evans had punched Bayne,

the Tactical Astrophysicist, in the eye for some disparaging remark about Southern California womanhood. The ratings were grumbling about the food . . .

And then it happened.

Cob was in the radio room when Sparks pulled the flimsy from the scrambler. It was a distress signal from the *Lachesis*. The *Atropos* had burst a fission chamber and was falling into the sun. Radiation made a transfer of personnel impossible, and the *Atropos* skeeterboats didn't have the power to pull away from the looming star. The *Lachesis* had a line on the sister dreadnaught and was valiantly trying to pull the heavy vessel to safety, but even the thundering power of the *Lachesis'* mighty drive wasn't enough to break Sol's deathgrip on the battleship.

A fleet of souped-up space-tugs was on its way from Luna and Venusport, but they could not possibly arrive on time. And it was doubtful that even the tugs had the necessary power to drag the crippled *Atropos* away from a fiery end.

Cob snatched the flimsy from Sparks' hands and galloped for the flying-bridge. He burst in and waved the message excitedly in front of Strykalski's face.

"Have a look at this! Ye gods and little catfish! Read it!"

"Well, dammit, hold it still so I can!" snapped Strike. He read the message and passed it to Ivy Hendricks with a shake of his head.

She read it through and looked up exultantly. "This is it! This is the chance I've been praying for, Strike!"

He returned her gaze sourly. "For Gorman to fall into the sun? I recall I said something of the sort myself, but there are other men on those ships. And, if I know Captain Varni on the *Lachesis*, he won't let go that line even if he fries himself."

Ivy's eyes snapped angrily. "That's not what I meant, and you know it! I mean this!" She touched the red-sealed surge-circuit rheostat.

"That's very nice, Lieutenant," commented Cob drily. "And I know that you've been very busy adjusting that gismo. But I seem to recall that the last time that circuit was uncorked everyone aboard became part of the woodwork . . . very messily, too."

"Let me understand you, Ivy," said Strike in a flat voice. "What you are suggesting is that I risk my ship and the lives of all of us trying to pull old Gorman's fat out of the fire with a drive that's blown skyhigh three times out of three. Very neat."

There were tears bright in Ivy Hendrick's eyes and she sounded desperate. "But we can save those ships! We can, I *know* we can! My father designed this ship! I know every rivet of her! Those idiots off Callisto didn't know what they were doing. These ships needed specially trained men. Father told them that! And I'm trained! I can take her in and save those ships!" Her expression turned to one of disgust. "Or are you afraid?"

"Frankly, Ivy, I haven't enough sense to be afraid. But are you so certain that we can pull this off? If I make a mistake this time . . . it'll be the last. For all of us."

"We can do it," said Ivy Hendricks simply.

Strike turned to Cob. "What do you say, Cob? Shall we make it hotter in here?"

Whitley shrugged. "If you say so, Strike. It's good enough for me."

Celia Graham left the bridge shaking her head. "We'll all be dead soon. And me so young and pretty."

Strike turned to the squawk-box. "Evans!"

"Evans here," came the reply.

"Have Sparks get a DF fix on the *Atropos* and hold it. We'll home on their carrier wave. They're in trouble and we're going after them. Plot the course."

"Yes, Captain."

Strike turned to Cob. "Have the gun-crews stand by to relieve the black-gang in the tube rooms. It's going to get hotter than the hinges of hell down there and we'll have to shorten shifts."

"Yes, sir!" Cob saluted and was gone.

Strike returned to the squawk-box. "Radar!"

"Graham here," replied Celia from her station.

"Get a radar fix on the *Lachesis* and hold it. Send your dope up to Evans and tell him to send us a range estimate."

"Yes, Captain," the girl replied crisply.

"Gun deck!"

"Gun deck here, sir," came a feminine voice.

"Have number two starboard torpedo tube loaded with a fish and a spool of cable. Be ready to let fly on short notice . . . any range."

"Yes, sir!" The girl switched off.

"And now you, Miss Hendricks."

"Yes, Captain?" Her voice was low.

"Take over Control . . . and Ivy . . ."

"Yes?"

"Don't kill us off." He smiled down at her.

She nodded silently and took her place at the control panel. Smoothly she turned old Aphrodisiac's nose sunward . . .

LASHED together with a length of unbreakable beryllium steel cable, the *Lachesis* and the *Atropos* fell helplessly toward the sun. The frantic flame that-lashed out from the *Lachesis*' tube was fading, her fission chambers fusing under the terrific heat of splitting-atoms. Still she tried. She could not desert her sister ship, nor could she save her. Already the two ships had fallen to within 18,000,000 miles of the sun's terrifying atmosphere of glowing gases. The prominences that spouted spaceward seemed like great fiery tentacles reaching for the trapped men on board the warships. The atmospheric guiding fins, the gun-turrets and other protuberances on both ships were beginning to melt under the fierce radiance. Only the huge refrigeration plants on the vessels made life within them possible. And, even so, men were dying.

Swiftly, the fat, ungainly shape of old Aphrodisiac drew near. In her flying-bridge, Strike and Ivy Hendricks watched the stricken ships in the darkened viewport.

The temperature stood at 140° and the air was bitter with the smell of hot metal. Ivy's blouse clung to her body, soaked through with perspiration. Sweat ran from her hair into her eyes and she gasped for breath in the oven hot compartment. Strike watched her with apprehension.

Carefully, Ivy circled the two warships. From the starboard tube on the gun-deck, a homing rocket leapt toward the *Atropos*. It plunged straight and true, spilling cable

as it flew. It slammed up against the hull, and stuck there, fast to the battleship's flank. Quickly, a robocrane drew it within the ship and the cable was made secure. Like cosmic replicas of the ancient South American "bolas," the three spacecraft whirled in space . . . and all three began that sunward plunge together.

The heat in the *Aphrodite's* bridge was unbearable. The thermometer showed 145° and it seemed to Strike that Hell must be cool by comparison.

Ivy fought her reeling senses and the bucking ship as the slack came out of the cable. Blackness was flickering at the edges of her field of vision. She could scarcely lift her hand to the red-sealed circuit rheostat. Shudderingly, she made the effort . . . and failed. Conscious, but too spent to move, she collapsed over the blistering hot instrument panel.

"Ivy!" Strike was beside her, cradling her head in his arm.

"I . . . I . . . can't make it . . . Strike. You'll . . . have to run . . . the show . . . after . . . all."

Strike laid her gently in an acceleration chair and turned toward the control panel. His head was throbbing painfully as he broke the seal on the surge-circuit.

Slowly he turned the rheostat. Relays chattered. From deep within old Lover-Girl's vitals came a low whine. He fed more power into the circuit. Cadmium rods slipped into lead sheaths decks below in the tube-rooms. The whining rose in pitch. The spinning of the ships in space slowed. Stopped. With painful deliberation, they swung into line.

More power. The whine changed to a shriek. A banshee wail.

Cob's voice came through the squawk-box, soberly. "Strike, Celia's fainted down here. We can't take much more of this heat."

"We're trying, Cob!" shouted Strike over the whine of the circuit. The gauges showed the accumulators full. "Now!" He spun the rheostat to the stops, and black space burst over his brain . . .

The last thing he remembered was a voice. It sounded like Bayne's. And it was shouting. "We're moving 'em! We're pulling away! We're . . ." And that was all.

The space-tug *Scylla* found them.

The three ships . . . *Atropos*, *Lachesis*, and old *Aphrodisiac* . . . lashed together and drifting in space. Every man and woman aboard out cold from the acceleration, and *Aphrodite's* tanks bone dry. But they were a safe 80,000,000 miles from Sol . . .

THE orchestra was subdued, the officer's club softly lighted. Cob leaned his elbow on the bar and bent to inspect the blue ribbon of the Spatial Cross on Strike's chest. Then he inspected his own and nodded with tipsy satisfaction. He stared out at the Martian night beyond the broad windows and back again at Strike. His frown was puzzled.

"All right," said Strike, setting down his glass. "What's on your mind, Cob? Something's eating you."

Whitley nodded very slowly. He took a long pull at his highball. "I understand that you goofballed your chances of getting the *Ganymede* back when Gorman spoke his piece to you . . ."

"All I said to him . . ."

"I know. I know what you said . . . and it won't bear repeating. But you're not fooling me. You've fallen for old Lover-Girl and you don't want to leave her. Ver-ry commendable. Loyal! Stout fellow! But what about Ivy?"

"Ivy?"

Cob looked away. "I thought that you and she . . . well, I thought that when we got back . . . well . . ."

Strike shook his head "She's gone to the Bureau of Ships with a designing job."

Cob waved an expressive arm in the air. "But dammit, man, I thought . . ."

"The answer is *no*. Ivy's a nice girl . . . but . . ." He paused and sighed. "Since she was promoted to her father's old rank . . . well . . ." He shrugged. "Who wants a wife that ranks you?"

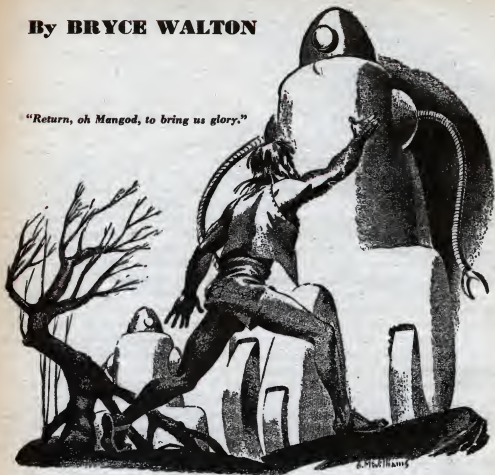
"Never thought of that," mused Cob. For a long while he was silent; then he pulled out an address book and leafed through until he came to the pages marked "Canalopolis, Mars."

And he was gratified to see that Lieutenant Commander David Farragut Strykowski III was doing the same.

IN HIS IMAGE

By BRYCE WALTON

"Return, oh Mangod, to bring us glory."



Towering and invulnerable, they stood on the hills, patiently awaiting their master. Meanwhile, they slew the vermin crawling below . . .

JON RAN DOWN THE LONG corridor and into the Old Man's room. He was breathless as he threw himself on his face beneath the Old Man's chair made from gypsum. A kind of savage eagerness lighted his face, but the Old Man's face, a frozen pallid ball crinkled into a million lines, was sad and hopelessly resigned.

"I seen 'em," Jon cried. "I seen 'em." His unhealthily pallid body, though big and rawboned, was slender and writhed with a leathery strength that comes with constant effort and exercise rather than diet and sun.

The Old Man shrugged. His voice was a hoarse whisper in that one cavern among the hundred and fifty miles of corridors, interlocking levels and rivers that made up the underground hideaway.

"So you seen 'em, Jon. Many have seen the Mechs. The Mechs might have seen you too. If they ever find us here—well, they'd probe us out, like we were grubs. And they'd burn us with those red-ray eyes. Why'd you go up on top? You know it's against the rules."

Jon got up. His chest heaved. His eyes were polished beads in a thick nest of reddish beard.

"'Cause I don't like livin' in this cave like a grub. I been up twice, and now I can't stay down here anymore. Nobody else's got guts enough to go up. So let 'em stay down here and rot! But I'm going back up on top, Chief. And I'm staying up there."

The Old Man leaned back. He couldn't hide the gleam of gruff respect in his eyes. "Go ahead, Jon, but don't come back down. Once they get on your tail, you can't shake 'em and you'd lead 'em right back here, and then they'd get the rest of us. As far as I know, Jon, we're the only humans left."

Jon's hands clenched. "And so might all of us be dead too. Livin' down here in this cave where they ain't never no sun, eatin' lizards and snakes, and dyin' off one by one anyway. We're all gonna be dead in another year. What's so great about spendin' that year crawlin' and grubbin' down here? Scared to even take one last look at the sun? It's not for me, Chief. I'm leavin'."

THE Old Man shrugged again. "Go ahead, I said. Just promise not to ever come back and lead them down here. You'll promise that, Jon?"

Something thickened in his throat, but he managed to say yes. He turned, then twisted back toward the Old Man. "You're smart," he said. "You're supposed to know about when they took over. I've asked others. No one seems to know, and they care less. Would you tell me, Chief. What are *they*—the Mechs?"

The Old Man's voice echoed strangely against the surrounding grotesque bars of limestone stalactites and stalagmites in multicolored hues of fusing reds and orange, purple and browns. A pinched face peered at them from between the ancient bars, then withdrew its tired eyes.

"Maybe there's fifty humans left down here in Mammoth Hole," the Old Man said softly. "Maybe there ain't nobody else left in the world. Just them with their silent machinery drivin' over the wastes, and their red death eyes sweeping the dark, grubbin' for us. The big war went on and on, nobody knows how long. But humans couldn't fight it. Too much deadly radiation, so they made machines to fight for 'em. The sky and the land

were just masses of machines, throwing out clouds and streamers and explosions. The land became nothing but pools and seas of deadly dust, and fire. The sky was clouded with it. And people went underground. They had to go down deep, and they couldn't come back up, what was left of 'em, for hundreds of years and more."

The Old Man was gazing with a distant, haunted expression at the small blind lizard crawling up the painted wall. Jon listened, his skin was cold. A shiver ran down his back.

"Then *they* started grubbing the humans out, and killing 'em. I don't suppose anyone knows how long it's been since *they* took over. That's wrong. I wasn't around then. Nor my father, nor my father's father's father. It was long, long before that. It was so long ago that—" The Old Man's eyes widened. His voice choked off with a cloud of unconscious fear that had slipped through.

"They're godly," he whispered. "You seen 'em. They're all shapes and angles, eubes, and small smooth running things. They all shine like metal. And I guess they are metal. Nobody knows what they are. I heard tell when I was a boy that they were just machines. Machines built by humans a long time before. And that somehow or other the hard radiation had put a spark in 'em that made 'em able to think, and move around and organize like humans used to do. But I reckon they're more intelligent than any humans ever were."

Jon backed away. Sweat popped out coldly on his face and chest. "I seen 'em," he choked. "I sneaked on top. I went down to the river. It took me hours to get used to the sun. I waited until the sun started going down, then I sneaked out and looked down the big hill that goes into the valley. I seen two of 'em. They must have been a hundred foot high. They was smooth. They had long snaking arms and single eyes that shot out red beams like fire. They stood on top of the hill against the sun. The sun was red all around 'em. They looked like they were made of metal, all right, Chief. But how can they move by themselves, and—and *think*, if they're metal?"

The Old Man sighed. "How?" He peered at Jon with tired retreating eyes.

"What is thought," he said then. "What was life, ever? Floods of gamma rays bathed them for centuries, and then they were living, and they had thoughts of their own. Humans never got a chance to find out what life was before he took it away from himself. Took it and gave it—to them."

The Old Man dropped his face in his shaking hands. Jon had never heard a man crying before. He backed away slowly, then turned and ran out of the great cavern.

A GREY dusky afternoon was dying when Jon crawled out of the small hall between rocks and started writhing down the hill. His eyes stayed open in fearful wonderment until tears rolled down his cheeks. The soft greens and browns of the great forest that thinned up into the hills. There was not the slightest hint that beneath this vast silent beauty, stretched the enormous grotesque underworld of Mammoth Hole.

Nor that in those nameless caverns and corridors along the cold and rushing and naked rivers a few unkempt savages clung to dim memories of centuries-lost power and surface civilization.

Jon stopped. An intangible yet powerful emotion surged in him. "I'm crawlin'," he gritted as he sat up. "I said I was sick a' crawlin.' I ain't a grub. I'm not crawlin' anymore. Not for them damn machines, not for anything. They can't do nothing but kill me, an' what's life down in that hole?"

He stood up. He stood up straight and started walking down the rocky trail, and finally along the smooth greenness beside the river. His strides were long and unhesitating, but inside him was a deep growing horror, as he remembered those shiny silver giants that had stood so silently on the hill against the red sunset. The huge attentive waiting stillness, and the sudden terrible sweep of the red beamed eye and the reaching of the metal arms.

He stopped and looked down at his thin white legs, starved of the sun, knotted and scarred from crawling over the harsh underground paths. He looked at his gnarled pallid fingers quivering in the cold.

He looked up at the sky. A few stars

were showing dimly, palely. "Oh God, give me a quick ending when my time comes, that's all I ask. Don't let me crawl anymore on my belly. Give me the guts to keep walkin', straight up, like I'm walkin' now."

There was no answer. There was no sound except the cry of birds in the forest, the drone of insects and other louder noises from the river. He was alone. He walked faster.

But he soon tired, because he had never walked far at a time. Underground, people crawled a lot of the time through narrow holes. And under there no one could walk far unless they went in circles.

He sat down to rest beneath the canopy of stars. He lay back and looked up at them, a feeling of frightful awe pressing down upon him. The night around him was colder now, and the sounds of the night had risen to a hungry song. And then he rolled over with a quick, terrible cry, leaped crouching to his feet.

There were at least a dozen of them. Great shiny angular and cubed monsters sliding noiseless down the hill. A peculiar bluish radiance pushed out around them, bathing the surrounding night in a deadly-seeming pall.

With a pathetic defiance, Jon picked up the heavy stone, stood with legs wide apart, holding the rock in front of him. Every nerve in him shrieked, pulling his muscles away. But he couldn't run. He couldn't run, nor crawl anymore. A kind of dark resigned courage replaced the first impulses of flight, and he hurled the rock. There was a futile thud, and the rock bounded from the great unruffled wall of metal.

Then—for an instant he didn't think the thoughts, the voices, were anything but his own, strange, alien, terrifying, inspired by his own fears.

And then he realized it was the *Mechs!*
"A grub!"

"Yes. I thought they were all gone."

"No. There are some remaining, deep in the soil. Central File says they are no longer of any danger. But File also retains orders to kill all organic things."

Jon moved toward them. He moved stiffly, a strange and intangible bulwark of purpose shielding him from the screaming horror.

Something of the awful indignity of his position shook him, sent a hot rage throbbing blindly past his temples. He heard his breath coming hard from tightened throat. These great nameless things—machines, intelligent metal, it didn't matter what. They had no idea of what he was, that he had a brain, that he could think. And yet, their gigantic thoughts were plain to him.

Some time, some time so very long ago, he—his kind—humans—had made these things. Had built them up from molten stuff, had put intricate interlocking machinery within them so that they could move, think for themselves, repair themselves. And then—humans had launched the Big War, had released seething seas of basic energy, and somehow these gigantic shiny silvery things had begun to—live.

But to them, Jon, a human, a descendant of the humans that had made them and had given them life, was less than the dirt under their towering, invulnerable radiance. Less than the dust beneath their sweeping red-death eyes. They had no conception that he was anything but a pale, crawling, cave-worm.

JON walked closer. He was not so much afraid for himself now. There was more of a sweeping terror of the whole situation, the terrible futility and irony. He wasn't afraid to die, and he knew that he had to die now, that there was no escape, no defiance.

He shook his fist at the silent, towering forms. "Damn you! It's me. Man. Man. I'm human. I'm not crawlin'. See, I'm not crawlin', I'm talkin' to you. I'm talkin' and I'm thinkin', too. See."

"It's making noises."

"Yes. All the various species of or-

ganic life make noises peculiar to their type. Have you not seen a grub before?"

"No. Let us kill it now. We must report back to Central File. How long will it take to kill all organic life?"

"Central File says it will take many more years, even though now most organic life has been destroyed. We must complete the task soon, you know. Man will return. Glorious Mangod. Mighty Mangod. Mangod the Creator. Mangod the Eternal!"

"Ah yes. Mighty Mangod. How long will it be before the Mangod's coming?"

Jon shivered, reached out a shaking hand as though to support himself against the air. He tried to speak, but his facial muscles seemed frozen. He wanted to say, "I'm Man. I'm your Creator. I made you, long ago." But he could say nothing. Nothing at all.

"That is not known. Mangod made us in his own image, then departed, promising to return. Return to bring us glory and eternity."

"May the Great Mangod who created us from the lifeless stuff of the dirt return soon, for only then may our destiny be fulfilled."

"Yes. May Mangod return soon. Meanwhile, Central File demands immediate action in preparation for that Day. Kill this grub. Soon all organic life that stands in the way of the Mangod's coming will be eradicated."

The thunderous impact of telepathic power roared in Jon's head as he staggered forward, fists clenched.

"FOR THEE, GREAT MANGOD. FOR WHOM WE WAIT."

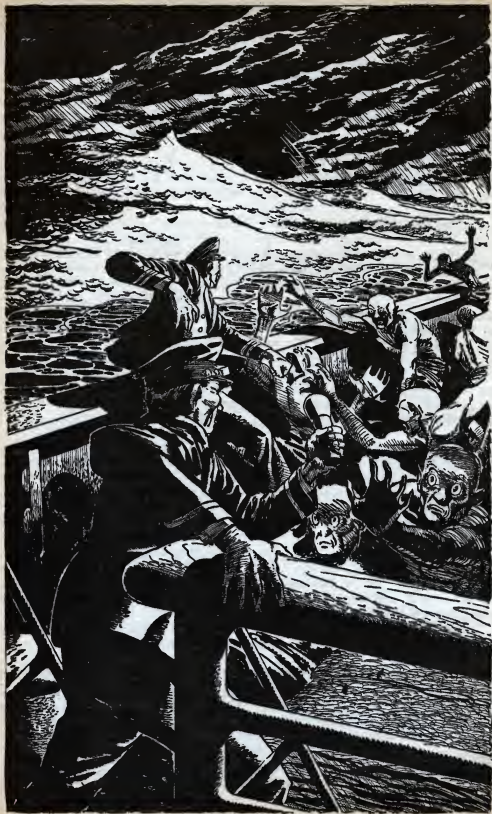
Jon laughed. Hot tears scalded his face as he laughed. He was still laughing as the red-death eye brightened, leaped out, and silently swept him away.

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For them, it was fists and feet, teeth and claws

MUTINY ON VENUS

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Boiling out of the slave-ship's stinking hold, the slimy, fever-maddened natives fought for freedom. What miracle could save the handful of sickened Earthmen on the bridge from the most terrible death in the System?

PORTER STOOD IN THE STAR-board wing of his bridge, looking down and aft along the quay. He was a big man, and broad—standing fully erect he would have been bigger. But he slumped badly and ran to paunch. In spite of the fact that his white tropical uniform was clean and smart, with braid and buttons untarnished, it was obvious that the climate was getting him down.

The climate—and the jobs that he had to do.

This was one of them. Up the star-board gangway, driven and herded like so many animals, crept a reluctant stream of convicts. There were those who said that they were animals. Porter was not one of these. He felt a sympathy for the natives of this world, living their own life

in their own way until the day when the ships of Man dropped roaring down through the eternal overcast. What followed was an old story. It had happened many a time on Man's own planet—the demand for cheap labour and raw materials, the setting up of an alien and unnatural legal code by the conquering invaders to satisfy that demand.

Convict labour is cheap. Convict labour is—expendable. No human would work in the marshlands of the Belt. Even among the overseers, armed and armoured, living in their air-conditioned, near-impregnable fortresses, the mortality rate was high. Among the natives—the convicts—it was higher. Conviction of an aborigine for failure to pay his poll tax was tantamount to a death sentence . . .

Porter watched the wretches reluctantly mounting his gangway, being herded aft to the cell accommodation in the after tween decks. As always, he felt mingled compassion and repulsion. They were so nearly human, these people—and yet there was no denying their not distant reptilian or amphibian ancestry. And—they stank. This was not the first time that Porter's ship had carried convict labour to the Belt ports—and no matter how he and his crew laboured to remove all traces of their unwelcome passengers the effluvium lingered, clung.

Once a convict ship always a convict ship.

There was a loud crash from the wheelhouse.

Porter swore, turned abruptly and strode rapidly across the clean, but perpetually damp, planking of his bridge. He flung open the wheelhouse door. Dillon, his Second Officer and navigator was inside. He was standing just abaft the chart table, looking ruefully down at the big P.P.I. It was obvious that the spare tube would have to be shipped before sailing. Dillon had removed the unbreakable perspex cover with the intention of giving it its routine coating of disinfectant—without which it would speedily have become opaque with the rapid growth of airborne molds. He, somehow, had dropped the bottle. It had gone through the end of the tube. Porter pushed Dillon to one side, looked down into the broken, tangled mess of deflector plates, grid and anodes. He said, trying hard to keep his voice emotionless, "How did this happen, Mr. Dillon?"

The Second put up a hand to push back his unruly red hair. He started a little as the disinfectant, which had splashed on to the less sensitive skin of his hands, stung his forehead. He replied, frankly, "I don't know, sir." Then, with infuriating vagueness, "Things drop . . ."

"They always do when you're around, Mr. Dillon. I don't know what you've cost this ship for assorted breakages—but it must be a tidy penny. All right—get one of the juniors to lend you a hand and get the spare shipped. And make sure it's tested before we sail."

"Ay, ay, sir," replied Dillon smartly and thankfully. He left the wheelhouse,

vanished down the ladder to the officers' flat, there to break up the poker school by his demand for assistance. Porter watched the slight, red-topped figure of his navigator go, permitted a half grin to flicker over his heavy features. Dillon might be expensive—but he was a good lad. And he helped to keep the ship happy and amused. One question, almost a greeting, was always sure to raise a laugh—"Heard what the Second Mate's dropped now?"

The Captain went back to the bridge. He looked up at the Blue Peter drooping limply and dispiritedly at the raking foremast, then turned and stared at the squat, strong buildings of Port Barclay, watched their outlines soften and fade as the yellow mists marched in from the sea. And then he could no longer see the foremast nor, looking aft, the funnel. He could have believed himself alone in a tiny world of his own were it not for the unpleasant, hateful noises drifting up from the gangway—the cracking of whips, the plaintive, half human cries of the convicts.

TELEPHONE buzzers sounded in the wheelhouse. Porter, looking down at his P.P.I. with its sweeping trace and its slowly fading afterglow, at the chart alongside it, ignored them. The Third Officer reported smartly, "All ready for' ard and aft, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Carter. Tell the Chief Officer to let go everything. Tell the Second to let go everything but his back spring."

Porter heard his orders being relayed to fo'c's'le and poop. He heard a new noise superimposed upon the steady roar of the blast turbines—the whine of electric motors as mooring lines snaked back aboard and on to their reels. The Third had switched to the amplifier, and the Chief Officer's voice came bellowing into the wheelhouse, "All gone forward!" Shortly after Dillon reported, less noisily, "All gone aft but the back spring."

The Captain looked down at the P.P.I., glanced from it to the gyroscope repeater. As if waiting for his attention the repeater clicked, slowly at first, then more rapidly. Under the influence of the strong current the ship's head was swinging away from the quay wall.

At the Captain's right hand, within easy

reach from where he stood staring down at the chart and the P.P.I., were the engine controls. Without looking away from the two pictures—one static, the other slowly moving and limned in light—he stretched out and put both engines full ahead. The kilowatts pouring from the turbo-generators surged through the motors. The screws churned up the muddy water aft. Slowly at first—fighting her own inertia and the strong thrust of the current—the big ship began to move. "Hard a-port," ordered Porter. "Hard a-port she is, Sir," answered the Quartermaster. "Let go the back spring," was the next command. The Third relayed it to Dillon at his station on the poop. Moments only had elapsed when the Second Officer's amplified voice boomed through the wheelhouse—"All clear aft!"

On the screen of the P.P.I. the two arms of the breakwater, two straight lines of pallid light, showed up ahead. Porter coned his ship so that she was steering straight for the opening. Outside the wheelhouse it was as thick as ever, zero visibility. Through the wet, yellow fog drifted the sound of voices, non-human, raised in dismal prolonged ululation. The aboriginal population of Port Barclay had come down to the quay-side in force, was sending off the latest load of victims to Man's cupidity in a way that was proper and fitting. From the steerage came a long, throaty wail in reply.

Porter winced, tried hard to keep his attention on the safe, efficient handling of his ship. He winced again when the mournful sound from aft was suddenly cut off, was replaced by angry shouts and the cracking of whips. "They leave the poor beggars nothing . . ." he murmured to himself. He shrugged his heavy shoulders, stared grimly down at chart and P.P.I. The breakwater arms came abeam, swept astern.

"Course now, sir?" asked the Third.

"Not yet, Mr. Carter. Just because you can't see the stern of this ship don't blandly assume that it's not there. I'll let her run until we have two hundred yards clearance. Oh—and tell Mr. Dillon finished with stations aft. He can come up and check his gyroscopes."

Carter passed the order aft. The Captain looked down at the fluorescent screen,

noted the time that the extremities of the breakwater arms cut the two hundred yard range circle. He said quietly — "Course zero, zero, zero, quartermaster." The man replied smartly. The steering repeater clicked, slowly to begin with, then faster and faster. The illuminated, calibrated card spun jerkily behind the transparent face of the instrument. The wheel rattled over to starboard to check the vessel's swing. "Course now, sir!"

"All right. That will do the wheel. Mr. Carter, switch over to the Iron Mike . . ."

Somebody flung open the starboard door of the wheelhouse, letting a gust of warm, fetid fog into its air-conditioned coolness. The door slammed shut. Porter straightened, looked up from the chart table, started to say, "Can't you come in quietly, Mr. Dillon?"

But it was not Dillon. It was a stranger, a big man, big as the Captain. He was dressed in khaki shorts and shirt with tarnished insignia. His knee-high boots were muddy. It was at least forty-eight hours since he had last shaved. His face, like Porter's, was heavy featured, but it was the face of a bully. He bellowed, "Tell your officers to mind their own bloody business, Captain!"

"Watch her, Carter," said Porter quietly. He regarded the intruder for a few seconds, glanced at the dull metal on the epaulettes. Then—"I don't think I have the pleasure, Major?" he asked.

"Major Kemp. Officer Commanding Guard. Wallis took sick just before sailing, so they sent me."

"I should have been told. But what's this about trouble with my officers?"

"It's that young, red-headed Second Mate of yours. He was coming along from aft just as we were putting the fear of God into those reptilian swine. He didn't like it, tried to throw his weight around. So I put him under arrest."

"You put him . . ."

THE wheelhouse door crashed open again. This time it was a native. Porter's hand shot down to where the holster that he always forgot to wear should have been. The Venusian was bigger than any of the Earthmen. He was naked save for a belt studded with tawdry scraps of metal and mirror. He grinned,

showing a mouth crammed full of needle sharp teeth. His protuberant eyes swivelled in their sockets as he stared about him, missing nothing.

"Well, Quassa?" demanded Kemp.

The native turned to face his master. He bowed—but there was, perhaps, only mock servility in his bearing.

"Plenty trouble blunt end, boss," he croaked. "Sailor officer call sailors, all fight soldiers. Sailors win. Me come here plenty quick, tell you. Maybe . . ." he looked at Porter and leered, gestured with the webbed claws that were his hands.

"No!" almost shouted the Major. Then—"This is a fine mess, Captain. Your men start the voyage with mutiny."

"I think the mutiny was on *your* side. But . . ."

The door opened and shut quietly. Dillon came in. His uniform was torn and he was bleeding from a cut over the right eye. He ignored the military officer, faced his own superior and saluted. He said briskly, "I have to report trouble aft, sir. When I came along from stations I found that the soldiers, under *this* man, had pulled some bundles of fat grass from the deck cargo. They had started a fire on deck. I don't know what it was for—but I think that they intended roasting some of the convicts a little. Anyhow, the sparks were blowing for'ard. There was a grave risk of the whole deck cargo going up—and you know how fat grass burns. So I told them," continued Dillon innocently, "to stop it . . ."

"He was interfering with discipline!" blustered Kemp.

"That is for me to decide," replied Porter icily. "By Mr. Dillon's telling—and you have not denied it—you and your men endangered this ship. That must not occur again. Furthermore, as long as I am Master here, I will not tolerate wanton brutality. Discipline, I agree, must be maintained. Apropos of that—one of the rules of this ship is that native passengers, free or under escort, are not allowed either on the bridge or in the engine room . . ."

"But Quassa, here, is my personal servant and bodyguard. He's faithful. And—he's no more than an animal . . ."

The Captain did not bother to dispute this. He looked from master to servant, noted well that the gleam in the protrud-

ing eyes was far from unintelligent. The same could be said for the whole, grotesque batrachian physiognomy. Here—true—was a savage; but never a brainless beast.

"You can go now, Major," said the seaman. "In case you are not familiar with the regulations regarding the carriage of convicts I will have a copy sent down to you. And, bear this well in mind, all and any disputes between your officers and men and mine are to be referred direct to me. *Get it!*" The last two words cracked like a whip.

"Yes, Captain," Kemp growled.

"Then I shall see you for inspection at eleven hundred tomorrow."

PORTER turned his back on the Major, walked to where Dillon and Carter, together with young Lacon, the Fourth Officer, were bending over the chart table.

"Dubonnet Island beacons showing up now, sir," reported the Second. "We should have them abeam inside of fifteen minutes."

The officers made way for the Captain, who looked down at screen of the P.P.I., at the sweeping scan, at the slowly fading, wanly luminous traces. The island, marshy and low lying, did not show up well. There was no clearly defined shoreline, no indication of off-lying dangers. But the black line being traced on the sensitised paper of the sonic sounder showed that Porter need, so far, have no fears of grounding. And the radar conspicuous beacons on the island came up bright and sharp, were an unmistakable "D" of light impressed on the cloudy vagueness of the swamp-land echoes.

"How much do we alter?" asked Porter.

"Seventy-five degrees to port, sir."

"You can go down to the gyroscope room now. I'll hold her steady on the beacons for you."

"Would you mind, sir, if I took Mr. Lacon down with me? He wants to see how it's done."

"That will be all right." Then—"But surely you've seen course altered before, Lacon?"

"Not this way, sir. I served my time on Earth."

"Oh. And came here by the fastest

rocket available with a brand new Master's Ticket in your pocket and high hopes of big money and quick promotion . . . You'll soon pick up our way of navigating, though. I was Chief Officer on the colonial trade myself before I came to Venus . . ." The Captain paused, a far away look came into his eyes. Then, abruptly, "Run along down with Mr. Dillon. He'll show you everything you want to know."

II

DILLON'S TASK CALLED FOR A certain degree of skill, of practice, of familiarity with the instruments with which he was working. Porter's part in the evolution called for seamanship of the highest order. The cursor on the P.P.I. was set at Green Nine Zero. The Captain had to jockey his ship, coming ahead and astern as necessary, so that the black line of the thin wire coincided exactly with the upright of the "D", so that the range from the nearest beacon was four thousand yards, no more and no less.

In the gyroscope room Dillon spoke into his telephone. "All ready, sir," he reported. Came the answer, "Stand by, Mr. Dillon. I'll let you know as soon as she's on . . ."

"I'm used to gyro compasses," said Lacon. "But this . . ."

"It's simple, really. A gyro compass works on Earth because a gyroscope can be converted into a North-seeking mechanism. It is rigid in space, on Earth as anywhere, and will remain so—but tilting and turning relative to the Earth's surface as Earth turns under it. The mercury ballistic keeps its axis parallel with the surface—and at the same time applies just enough force to make it precess back to the meridian . . ."

"I know . . ." began the Fourth, but Dillon gave him no chance to continue. He enjoyed acting as Mentor. He said reasonably, "You've got to walk before you can run."

"Well, as you probably know, Venus does not rotate on her axis. Some day, when the Sun tides have slowed her up still more, she'll rotate once with every revolution around the Sun. They reckon that Port Threfall in the Belt, where we're bound now, will have perpetual noon

—and a solar altitude of ninety. That'll dry the swamps out! Won't be in our time, though. Anyhow—here we are now with day half a Venus year long, night likewise, no axial rotation and no gyro compass. Magnetic storms are far too common to let the magnetic compass be any more than a standby that'd never be used in any case. But all the routes and courses from port to port, from headland to headland, have been worked out. With Dubonnet right abeam, distant four thousand, we have to come seventy-five degrees to port. Then it's a straight run of twelve hundred forty-nine miles to Cape Gibbey, seeing nothing till we hit it. Then . . ."

"But . . ."

"Bring her round now, Mr. Dillon," came Porter's voice.

"Ay, ay, sir."

"So," explained the Second Officer, "I just precess the gyroscope seventy-five degrees, as shown on this scale on the base plate. So . . . And I leave her tilted up, looking aft, about thirty-five degrees. She'll have levelled off by the time we're half way. She'll be tilted up for'ard when we get there . . ."

He shouted into the mouthpiece of his telephone, "Right on now, sir!"

"Thank you!" came the answering hail.

On the bridge, in the wheelhouse, the repeaters clicked over steadily from 075° to 000°. In the gyroscope room Dillon and the Fourth watched the heavy instrument swing, on its vertical axis, relative to the ship. It was hard to believe that it was not swinging, precessing, whilst the ship remained steady on her original heading. Both officers felt the desire, the absurd urge, to precess the mechanism back to its original zero on the base plate calibrations. Then they felt the ship roll as she came beam on to the heavy swell setting down from the nor'ard. She lurched heavily. The gyroscope cover, that Dillon had carelessly left propped against a stanchion, overbalanced and fell. Dillon moved, fast, and caught it just in time. He lost his own balance, himself almost fell against the gyroscope. Lacon grabbed him and held him.

The Second grinned at his junior. Then, airily, "Things *will* drop," he explained. "Just a manifestation of the natural cus-

sedness of the inorganic . . . But thanks, anyhow. I should have been very unpopular with Pop if he'd had to line her up all over again!"

The next day—or, to be more precise, twenty four hours later on a world whose days were sixteen weeks long—the weather conditions had not changed. There was little wind—although there was a heavy beam swell—and the ship was still boring steadily through an opaque yellow fog. The air was saturated, so moist as almost to demand gills rather than lungs. But, in the wheelhouse and in the accommodation, it was comfortable enough. In the convict quarters—separated by airtight bulkheads from the human's part of the ship—it should have been comfortable enough for those living there. Ports and doors and hatches should have been open to the moisture laden air, to the fog, to the sea's exhalation of sweet corruption.

Porter, accompanied by his Chief Officer, by Major Kemp and the Orderly Room Sergeant Major, made the rounds above deck first. He tested the tightness of the lashings of the big bales of fat grass, made sure that the greasy, oil-exuding vegetation showed no signs of slipping free of its bonds. He wrinkled his nose with disgust as a vagrant eddy brought him a pungent whiff from the convict galley ventilators. There an unsavory stew of this same fat grass—together with sundry creeping things, fresh and very long dead, was being prepared. He wanted, as he always did when that odour hit him, to throw up. But, in front of the two soldiers, he had to maintain his seamanlike dignity. They, obviously bored with the whole proceedings, would have welcomed a diversion.

He swallowed hard, said, "Everything seems to be satisfactory up here. We will inspect the convict decks now, Major."

HE LED the way to the nearest companionway. The stout double door was shut. Porter raised his eyebrows, stood back and waited for the Sergeant Major to step forward and open them for him.

There were two guards on duty at this entrance, lounging at the foot of the stairway. They straightened to attention slowly and reluctantly. Again Porter's eye-

brows went up. Then his nose wrinkled once more. He had been prepared for the sickening stench of slimy, moisture exuding bodies, for the corrupt, hothouse atmosphere of the convict decks. But this was worse. It was not hot, it was not moist — it was dry, dusty decay and somehow evil. There was death in it.

The Captain, shocked into alertness, glared around him. He saw the ports screwed tight shut, the closed doors, and, overhead, the dogged skylights. He walked to the nearest hygrometer, saw that temperature and relative humidity were well down. He heard the droning of the air-conditioning unit.

Porter grabbed Kemp's arm. He dragged the protesting Major to the nearest cell, forced him to look through the grill. Sprawled on the filthy matting were the two occupants. Their eyes were covered with a dull film. Their skin, that should have been moist and glistening, was dry and scaly. They were panting heavily. One of the Venusians raised himself on his elbow, looked straight at the two men. He did not know the Captain — but knew enough of the ways of men to recognize that four gold bars on the shoulder denoted authority. He said something in a dry, sibilant whisper, spread his webbed, clawlike hands imploringly. His lack-lustre gaze shifted to Kemp. The eyes, behind their translucent coating, glared redly. And the thin, hissing voice was that of a snake, with all of a snake's venom.

"What do you want to do, Kemp?" demanded Porter. "Kill them all?" Then, to his Chief Officer, "Get your men down here at once, Mr. Whitbread. Get everything opened up. Stop the air conditioner; put a padlock on the controls and bring the key to me."

"I'll not tolerate this interference!" blustered the Major.

"No? Let me tell you this, Kemp—I'm Master here. Humanitarian grounds apart, my responsibility is to deliver these — slaves—to Port Threlfall in good order and condition."

"They must be taught discipline. They're straight from the jungle, some of them. There are one or two murderers among them as well as mere tax evaders. That swine who looked at you so imploringly—he's got life for killing a trader.

His cell mate assaulted a missionary."

"I will decide what conditions are to be inside my own ship."

"But my guards, man. You can't expect them to stand a four hour shift in a stinking hothouse."

"I can, and do, expect it. That will be all."

And when Porter said "that will be all" in that voice—it was all. The soldier tried to argue and some of his men, sullen of being deprived of their comfort, joined in. But it made no difference. And Whitbread's working party opened doors and ports and skylights, and a sighing sound went up from the packed cells, and the yellow life-giving fog surged and billowed in through every aperture.

And Quassa, Kemp's big Venusian servant, came in from the deck and stood behind his master. Porter looked at him a little uneasily, noticed how the native's regard flickered from the military officer to himself. There was something ironical behind those bulging eyes, a grim amusement. And Porter thought—*I'm a bloody fool. I should never have bawled Kemp out in front of his own men, in front of the convicts. The man's a swine, and deserved it, but . . . The white man's burden and all that . . . oh, well . . .*

He left the sullen Kemp, the perspiring resentful guards, and walked slowly back to his own quarters.

AT THIS TIME of the year—or day—you can never be certain what the currents will be," declared Dillon.

He, with young Lacon, was standing aft, on the poop. It was dark. It was blowing a gale from the eastward. The sky was overcast, but there was no fog. Instead there were frequent flurries of hail and sleet. A big floe, thin, brittle, breaking up still further with every sea, slid by, gleaming pallidly in the glow from the stern light.

Lacon turned up the collar of his greatcoat, pulled the attached hood more securely over his head. He complained, "I never thought that Venus was like this."

"You're seeing a side of Venus that very few people do see. Not every Master likes making a voyage to the edge of the night—even when it means cutting off a couple of hundred miles. But this Old

Man loves it. Says it reminds him of Cape Horn . . ."

"Me too," agreed the Fourth, shivering. "But I still don't like it."

"This'll thicken your blood, man! I believe that if some of you young fellows really lived here, and had no means of transport, you'd do what some of the more backward tribes and most of the Day Side animals do—hibernate . . . And that reminds me—one thing you *must* see is the Day People migrating away from the sunset. There's a couple of reels of film in the ship's library—I took 'em myself with the infra-red camera. Whacking great twin canoes, decked over, with big square matting sails, scudding before the gale . . . One thing I've never got yet, although I'm still hoping, is the people of the thirty fourth parallel on the move. *They* don't go in for sail. They have big, fish-lizard things, sort of marine draught horses, to tow their boats for them . . ."

"And the people round our settlements?"

Dillon spat over the rail.

"They've had it," he said flatly. "They're fast becoming no more than parasites, hangers on. If they want to shift—or if the Powers That Be want to shift 'em—the likes of us get the job . . ." He continued, after a pause, "It's a pity. They hadn't a bad sort of culture—for their world. And now, whether we're humane or not, that culture is dying. But this isn't buying the baby a new frock!"

He busied himself with the machine by the taffrail, pulled a fathom or so of fine wire from the big reel, bent a large, heavy grapnel to the end of it. Lacon, however, was still more interested in Venusian ethnology and biology than in navigation.

"Is it true," he asked, "that there are Night People?"

The Second did not look up from his task. "Yes," he replied briefly.

"I was just asking," said the Fourth a little huffily. "As a matter of fact I was yarning to Major Kemp just before I came aft—and I didn't know whether to believe some of the things he told me or not . . . You know his servant, Quassa . . . Did you know that he's a murderer? It seems that he broke into the hut of some woman scientist who was gathering data among the tribes, and he . . ."

"I don't want to hear it," growled Dillon. "Although it's just the sort of gentleman's gentleman that Kemp would have . . . Now . . . Stand by for a demonstration of streaming the log. I suppose you had a Chernikeeff back on Earth,"

"Yes."

"We have one here, too—as you know. And, as you know, the most efficient log ever made can't give you more than your speed through the water. That's all very well on Earth—your seasonal current charts are pretty reliable. They should be, too, with hundreds of years of data to work on. Here—we can never be sure. Luckily the seas are mainly shallow. As a matter of fact this technique was first tried out back on Earth, way back in the time of one of their World Wars. It was used by mine-layers and mine-sweepers, who had to navigate pretty accurately and closely in minefields. And they, as you know, were always in relatively shallow water . . . Here goes!"

Dillon went to the weather, the starboard rail of the poop. He took good care to keep his body forward of the grapnel and its trailing tail of wire. He poised the grapnel like a harpoon, threw it like one, out and forward. The reel and the lead block whined as the wire ran out. It was only leading towards the bows for a matter of seconds, then it pulled the lead block along its curved track on the taff-rail until it was stretching astern.

The Second Officer ran aft. He snatched up a little feeler, an "L" shaped rod with a wooden handle. He brought the angle of the "L" down over the fast outrunning wire. He pressed down, hard. The wire sagged visibly. There was no real weight on it. Suddenly it straightened with a jerk. Dillon removed his feeler, said — "She's holding!" He drew the Fourth's attention to the dial on the framework of the reel—"There! Nineteen point four over the ground. And we're doing sixteen eight through the water, by Chernikeeff. And that's not all . . ."

He showed Lacon how the wire made an angle with the fore and aft line of the ship, how the reel swivelled, following the direction of the travelling lead block. He showed him the pointer and the calibrated plate at the base of the reel. "There you are," he said, "Nineteen four over the

ground, sixteen eight through the water, course made good twelve degrees to port of what we're steering. Something for you to work out."

"How do you get the grapnel back?"

"We don't. They're expendable. They're the one thing I can drop without bothering to pick 'em up again. When I put on the brake the weak link will snap, and all we recover is the wire. That's why we don't do this more often . . ."

THE wind was coming aft now, veering fast and increasing in force. There was no longer any shelter abaft the poop house. A sea broke over the starboard quarter—nothing heavy, luckily, but showering the two officers with frigid spray and tinkling fragments of thin ice.

"To hell with this!" decided Dillon. "This is too much of a good thing." He slammed on the brake of the reel, then started the little electric motor that would recover the wire. He stood with Lacon, his body swaying to the lift and scend of the ship, watching the gleaming filament snaking up over the rail. He cursed as an unusually heavy lurch sent him staggering. He clutched Lacon, put his mouth close to the other's ear and bawled — "We'll inspect the lashings on the deck cargo on our way back to the bridge. They may have worked loose."

"Wouldn't surprise me!" shouted the Fourth. "Not in this weather!" He looked forward to the big, humped mass of bales on the after hatches, looming in dim, black silhouette against the dark sky.

The end of the wire came up, clicked through the guide block. Dillon stopped the motor, then replaced the cover over the reel. The wind caught it, almost wrenched it from his hands. He had to fight to get it down.

Just before he straightened the Fourth shouted, his voice full of sudden apprehension, "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"A scream. And shots."

"Rubbish. Just the wind. And something rattling somewhere. We'd better see what it is."

Nevertheless Dillon got up from his knees, clutching the cover of the log for support, stood and listened. But there was no sound that was anything more than the

noises of wind and sea. Yet he wasn't happy. "Damn you, Lacon," he growled. "You've made me as nervous as a cat with your screams and phantom gunfire. And, talking of guns, have you got yours?"

"Afraid not."

"You should have it. You know very well that the regulations say that officers should go armed at all times whilst convicts are being carried."

"Have you got yours?"

"I don't see how that has anything at all to do with it."

"No? Well—there's one maritime rule the same on Venus as on Earth. Don't do as I do—do as I say . . ."

Dillon laughed. "All right, Fourth, you win. But I always feel such a bloody fool weighted down with lethal ironmongery. Things always happen to other people's ships—never your own. . . ."

"True," agreed Lacon. "It can't happen here." He added—"We hope . . ."

He switched on his torch, started to swing the beam along the wet, gleaming deck. Dillon struck his hand down. "Careful!" he warned. "Maybe you heard things, maybe you didn't. But with the wind where it is now the turbines could explode and we'd hardly hear them here. We'll proceed forward with caution—just in case . . ."

Abruptly, blindingly sudden, the darkness of the fore part of the ship was torn with long streamers of flame. Lacon gasped, started to ask what it was. Dillon knew. Covering the ladders giving access to the boat decks were jets—fed, when the right valves were turned, by the blazing exhaust gases of the blast turbines. The fact that the right valves had been turned meant one thing—*mutiny*. It meant that the after part of the ship was in the hands of the convicts. It meant that Dillon and Lacon, unless they could win to the relative safety of the midships island, were as good as dead.

"Quick!" cried the Second. "The after escape!"

III

FOLLOWED BY THE FOURTH, he climbed up the short ladder to the top of the poop house. There was the cowl of the big ventilator communicating

with the motor room. There was a ladder inside the ventilator shaft so that, in the event of shipwreck, anyone trapped in the motor room had still one means of escape left.

Apparently the engineers on duty were alive to the possibility that this means of egress might be used as an entry by evilly disposed persons. The aperture of the cowl was sealed with a closed iris diaphragm of steel.

Dillon cursed. He ran to the box which housed the after telephone. He turned the pointer to the Engineroom position, pressed hard on the calling button. He bellowed "Hello!" into the mouthpiece for what seemed like several minutes. There was no answer. He twisted the pointer to Bridge. Again—there was no answer.

He said bitterly, "I wish that the idiot who wired this ship was here!"

"Why?"

"The telephone cables run through the after convict decks. I don't suppose that the mutineers have had the savvy to cut 'em on purpose—but they might have been torn down in a spasm of general destruction and bloody mindedness . . ."

"D'you think they can see us here?" asked Lacon apprehensively.

"No. At least, I hope not. The flame-throwers are making enough light—but we're in the shadow of the deck cargo. Look!"

He pointed. Atop the humped mass of bales appeared the black silhouettes of struggling figures. Firearms were in use—the two officers could see the orange flashes, faintly hear the detonations as they drifted aft against the roaring gale. It seemed that both sides had firearms. It seemed that one party, the smaller, was retreating aft over the uneven, treacherous surface of the bales.

And then it was overwhelmed by a wave of dark figures that surged up and over from forward. The black silhouettes of arms rose high in air, the black silhouettes of clubs and knives descended with sickening viciousness. There was a faint, high screaming that died abruptly in mid note. But arms and weapons rose and fell still, like working parts of some machine running wild, out of control. Then the snow came down, thick and blinding, turning all the world into a swirling white opa-

city. White, that is, in the rays of the sternlight. On either beam it was grey. And forward, where the flamethrowers guarded the midships castle, glowing with a ruddy glare.

"Come on!" bawled Dillon. "This is our only chance!"

He jumped recklessly down from the deckhouse to the deck, slipped on the treacherous, unsteady surface and fell heavily. But he scrambled to his feet. Lacon saw that he was holding his torch so that it could, if need be, be used as a weapon. He himself did not risk the jump, but scrambled down the ladder. Dillon cursed him for his tardiness, growled—"Come on!"

"Not so fast. Those flamethrowers..."

"There's bound to be somebody on the boatdeck. If we can only get as far as the ladder without being knocked off..."

The snow was thinning now. Lights showed as lights, not as vague, haloed blurs. The two officers could see, forward, the intermittent flashes from firearms and—for they were now on the starboard side of the poop and out of the shadow of the deck cargo—the roaring, jagged swords of fire guarding the boat deck ladder.

Dillon led the way. He hugged the hatch coamings, the darkness down the side of the high-piled stack of bales. He ran lightly and easily, staggering ever so slightly with the motion of the ship. Lacon, following, did not have his senior's confidence, his intimate knowledge of the layout of the vessel. And once he tripped over something soft and fell heavily. He started to get to his feet—and then saw what it was over which he had fallen. He stayed there on his hands and knees, retching, lacking the strength and the will to come erect. The Second looked back, hastily retraced his footsteps. He grabbed Lacon's arm and pulled him away from the body. He put his face against the Fourth's and almost shouted—"Snap out of it, man! He's dead—and we can't help him!"

"But his face... And the way they've..."

"I don't want 'em to do the same to us. Come on, now!"

Once Lacon was no longer staring at what had been Major Kemp he was able

to move. The immediate memory was bad enough, but it wasn't as bad as the actuality—the smashed face, the gouged eyes, the ingeniously obscene mutilations. The dreadful weakness, the urge to vomit, were not past—but they were under control. Dillon heard the Fourth muttering, over and over, "*They won't take me alive... They won't take me alive...*"

THE SECOND renewed his grip on Lacon, shook him hard and brutally. "Are you coming with me?" he demanded, "or do you want to jump over the side now? It'll be quite quick—especially if you remember not to strike away from the ship's side, if you let the screws get you..."

It was sound psychology, and it was enough. To every seaman, on every world, perhaps the ultimate in horror is the idea of falling overboard, of seeing the ship diminishing steadily and uncaring over the pitifully circumscribed horizon, or—perhaps worse—to be drawn into the vortex surging through the threshing screws.

Dillon started forward again—more cautiously now, for Kemp's had been only the first of the bodies. There must have been large scale slaughter on the after deck—of both Humans and Venusians. It seemed that all, or almost all, of the guards must have died—some fast, some slowly. Dillon stopped once or twice, conquered his repugnance, searched the corpses for weapons. But there were none to be had. Judging from the volume of fire coming from where the mutineers abaft the midships island were replying to the marksmen on the boat deck they were all in use.

The two officers could see now what was happening. Bales had been torn down from the cargo, were stacked as a rough barricade from the hatch to the rail. Behind this crouched the convicts. On the boatdeck, above the flaming barrier to the ladders, were the defenders of the midships castle. They were taking what cover they could, were using their ammunition slowly and sparingly. It was the natives who were responsible for the ragged, crackling volleys. Execrable marksmen, handling weapons that they had seen used but had never before used themselves, they sought to compensate for their ex-

ecrable marksmanship by sheer weight of fire.

And it worked. Inevitably, it worked. Dillon saw two of the crew leap convulsively from behind their inadequate protection, slump and crumple in a conclusive sort of way.

"Who's that in charge up there?" asked Dillon suddenly.

Lacon strained his eyes, strove to pierce the veil of fire and snow and steam. He said, uncertainly, "It's the Third, I think . . ."

"Stand by to rush!" barked the Second. Then, raising his voice, he bellowed, "Carter! Carter! We're making a run for it! Turn off the flamethrowers when we get to the ladder! Turn off . . ."

The dim, heavily muffled figure that was Carter raised a hand in acknowledgment, shouted and gestured to his men. With the wind aft, blowing the sound away from them, the two in the rear of the mutineers could not hear his orders, but they saw a man run to the little, protected hutch in which were the master valves. And this they saw as they were running forward, towards the barricade of bales and the surprised natives manning it.

It was the surprise that saved them. The Venusians knew that they had swept the deck clear of human life. To them this was an attack in force, from the rear. Perhaps they remembered the tunnel escape, right aft, that they had omitted to guard. Or, if they knew nothing of these things, they assumed that there was some below-deck way from bridge to poop open to the defenders amidships.

Dillon and Lacon were among the massed, slimy bodies before pistols could be brought to bear. Some of the mutineers did fire — but the vicious little rocket projectiles caused death and casualties in their own ranks. It was fists and feet — and teeth and claws. Except for the torches carried — and soon lost — by the officers, poor makeshift clubs, neither knives nor the crude bludgeons were used.

On the boat deck Carter literally danced in an agony of apprehension. He dare not fire into that mass of struggling bodies. And he knew that if he did not do something about it he would be the witness of

a slow, gruesome dismemberment — such as he had seen befall one of the guards. He wanted to lead a sally to rescue his two shipmates — but he had strict orders not to leave his defense position. He called a quartermaster — "Brown! Run up to the bridge, tell the Captain that Mr. Dillon and Mr. Lacon are down on the after deck. Ask if we can go down to save them . . ."

But salvation came from an unexpected quarter. Dillon and Lacon were buried under a squirming pile of stinking, slimy bodies, unnaturally and unhealthily hot, waiting for the talons at their eyes, the knives at their joints. Lacon managed to gasp, brokenly, "I wish . . . I'd taken . . . your advice. It would have been . . . better . . ." Dillon made no reply. He relaxed, then put all his energy into one last effort. His muscles cracked as he heaved himself into a sitting posture, as he fought to free his arms. And then, amazingly, he was free. He glared around him wildly. He saw that a tall, big Venusian was pulling his compatriots up and away one by one, contemptuously tossing them to one side as if they were puppies. At first he did not recognize this strange, doubtful ally—then saw from the belt with its tawdry ornamentation that it was Quassa.

The Venusian looked at him, showed all his needle-sharp teeth in what must have been meant for an ingratiating smile. "Bad Venies kill Master," he croaked. "Come!"

HE reached out a webbed talon, jerked Dillon to his feet. He kicked at the still struggling pile of bodies over Lacon, grasped that officer's exposed shoulder with the long toes of his right foot, pulled him clear of the melee.

Dillon went to his hands and knees, bent over his shipmate. He was still alive, but groggy. "Get up, man!" shouted the Second. "Quassa's saved us. I don't know for how long he can hold his friends off . . ."

And that, indeed, was a doubtful factor. The big Venusian had turned to face his bemused compatriots, was haranguing them in his incomprehensible language. Or—he could have been cursing them. It seemed almost certain that they were cursing back. It was almost more than Dillon could do

to turn his back on the scene, but he did so, dragged the half-conscious Lacon up to and over the barricade of greasy bales. He looked back when he had boosted the Fourth over the barrier, was in time to see Quassa draw his knife, bring it slashing down on the head of a Venusian who was threatening him with a pistol. The body, green blood and brains oozing from the split skull, fell to the deck. The mob surrounding the loyal servant—or the renegade—drew back a pace. Pistols were drawn, but not used. And, still facing the mutineers, still loosing his stream of hissing, crackling invective, Quassa backed to the barricade, got over it somehow without turning, followed the slow, limping Dillon and the crawling Fourth to the foot of the ladder.

"Off!" Carter bellowed.

The jets of screaming fire dwindled and sagged, died. On his hands and knees Lacon reached the lower tread, put out one hand, screamed as the hot metal burned through glove and skin and flesh. Carter shouted orders. Two men hurried down, careful not to touch the glowing handrails, lifted Lacon and half hoisted, half carried him to safety. From the port side of the boatdeck came a hail of fire as the marksmen there covered the retreat of their shipmates, sent their projectiles along the face of the barricade.

Dillon didn't wait for assistance. He went up the ladder fast, in spite of his stiffness and weakness. That way the incandescent metal didn't have time to burn through the thick soles of his boots. That way his feet weren't actually burned—only half roasted. Nevertheless—he was whimpering a little when he got to the top.

He took a firm grip on himself, fought down the childish noises that rose in his throat. And yet—strangely, unnaturally—they continued. They were loud enough not to be drowned by the hissing scream of the flamethrowers when somebody opened the valves again. Dillon turned. There, just behind him, was Quassa. The Venusian put out his hand to steady himself. The Second Officer did not shrink back from the contact as he ordinarily would have done. It was not gratitude to the native for having saved his life. It was pity. Quassa's feet were no more than stinking, charred lumps of flesh. Every

step he took must have been agony.

"Shoot him!" somebody was screaming hysterically. "Carter! Shoot him! He did to Kemp what he did to the woman . . ."

Dillon looked from the Third, his pistol raised uncertainly, to Lacon, sprawled on the snow-covered deck, weakly blubbering. Carter motioned to Dillon, with the pistol, to stand to one side.

"Hold it!" ordered the Second. "You can't. He saved our lives. What will these people think of us if this is the way we repay our helpers?"

"Perhaps you're right. But . . . The Fourth says . . ."

"The Fourth saw as much as I did—and that was damn all. His nerve's gone—and small wonder. Better get him along to the Quack. And this poor devil, too."

"Don't you think he'd better see the Old Man first? He may be able to tell us something. And, just in case, we'd better disarm him . . ."

Quassa seemed to understand what was being said. Slowly, so slowly that there was no chance of his action being misconstrued, he pulled his broad bladed knife from his belt. He reversed it, offered it, hilt first, to Dillon. The man hesitated, then took it. He slipped it through the belt of his coat.

Two sailors had picked up Lacon, were carrying him to the surgery. Barclay had hurried aft again, was once more engaged in his task of defense. The brief lull in the firing had come to an end, and the part of the boat deck where Dillon and Quassa were standing was dangerously exposed.

"Come," ordered the Second. Then—"Can walk?"

"Can . . . walk. But feet . . . all burn . . ."

"Bimeby fix. First, see Captain."

"See Captain . . . Good."

IT WAS NOT a pleasant journey from a boat deck to bridge. Some of Dillon's pity had evaporated, most of his repugnance had returned. The native was almost incapable of walking by himself, had to be helped every step of the way. Even through his thick, winter uniform the officer could feel the sliminess. He could smell the fetid breath—its unpleasantness enhanced by some cause; pain, fear, or

the unnaturally high temperature that Dillon had noticed during the scuffle on the after deck.

Captain Porter, a big bulk looming out of the snow-swept darkness, hurried forward as Dillon and the native climbed the last few rungs of the bridge ladder.

"Dillon!" he cried. "I thought you were gone, man! And who's that with you? Lacon?"

"No, sir. Lacon's been taken to the hospital. This is . . ."

"A prisoner?"

"No. It's Quassa, sir—Kemp's servant. He saved our lives."

Porter whistled incredulously. He said—"The others must have had it in for him badly."

"I'd like to get him down to the hospital, sir. His feet were charred to stumps on the red-hot ladder."

"I'd like to question him first. There are things I'd like to know. I'm sorry about his feet—but my Chief officer's dead, and half my crew wounded, not to mention Kemp and his worthless bunch of gutter scourgings. *They* let us down! They thought they could take things easy in this cold weather—according to all the rules the convicts should have been torpid, on the verge of hibernation. But there's a drug—the Night People make it. It's used in the labour camps on the edge of the night. And that's what these Venies have got hold of!

"You, Quassa! You savvy no-cold-sleep-medicine?"

"Me savvy, Captain master. Major Kemp master, him keep little all time, give me suppose go Night Side. He no keep much. Mebbe cooks . . . Mebbe put in stew . . ."

"You no savvy?"

"No, Captain master."

"Sir!" cried Dillon. "Look at his feet!" He shone the torch that he had taken from the wheelhouse on the injured members. "Standing around in this snow won't help them . . ."

Porter coughed. He prided himself on being a just man, made it his boast that Human and Venusian alike could expect a fair deal from his hands. And after all, the native had saved the lives of his officers. He was alone and unarmed, and badly injured, on the bridge of a ship,

in an environment as alien as the control room of a cruiser from Alpha Centauri would have been to the seamen.

"All right," he said reluctantly. "You go. See Doctor, make feet well. Me see you bimeby . . ."

"I'll take him down through the accommodation, sir."

"As you please. And hurry back. I'm alone up here—and we should be picking up Cape Tennant at any time now."

DILLON turned to go into the wheelhouse, saw that Quassa had preceded him. And then, without warning, the doors shut. The heavy, armored screens slid up over the windows. And there was a shrill, imperative wail from the siren.

Porter drew his pistol, discharged the full magazine at the now impregnable wheelhouse. But it was too late. And, by shutting and locking the doors, Quassa had gained far more than personal protection. He had gained control of the ship. The wheel was in there—although, unless the Venusian knew enough to switch from automatic to manual helm, the vessel would continue to steer herself. The engine controls were there. The telephones were there. So were the switches that controlled every door into the midships island.

What Quassa could do didn't really matter much. What did matter was the fact that, as long as he held the wheelhouse, he effectively prevented the ship's rightful master from doing anything.

It was characteristic of Captain Porter that he wasted no time on recriminations. He was never one of those shipmasters—all too common—who would be capable of saying: "*We* put the ship ashore, *I* got her off." It was his error of judgment that had allowed the native on to the bridge. He would have rather hated himself had he behaved otherwise; after all, the Venusian had saved the lives of two of his officers, had suffered considerably whilst so doing. He had felt grateful to Quassa, he had felt sorry for him, and therein he had erred. It was because of his essential humanity that he had erred . . .

"Mr. Dillon!" barked Porter to his navigator, who was struggling ineffectually with the armoured door of the wheelhouse.

"Mr. Dillon! Go down to the boatdeck;

see if you can find the carpenter or any of the engineers. See if Mr. Carter can spare them. Tell them to come up here. If Chips can still get to his shop for'ard, he'd better bring his tools." Then, to himself, "I wonder what that blast on the siren was for . . ."

IV

PORTER WALKED ROUND THE wheelhouse, peering through the narrow slits in the armour plating of the window screens, methodically testing every possible point of weakness. But he wasted no time on futile attacks on thick metal with bare hands. He was content to wait until his engineers and his carpenter came to the bridge. He was confident that, given tools, they could soon effect an entry. And the creature inside the wheelhouse, once a door was forced, would be no more dangerous than an oyster out of its shell. Apart from the inconvenience he was causing he was not dangerous now. In the dim light from P. P. I., from magnetic compass bowl, from gyroscope repeater, Porter could see him. He was sitting huddled against the after bulkhead, looking at least half dead. The Captain was relieved. He was afraid that Quassa had, somehow, gained some knowledge of the ship's whereabouts, had planned to alter course and drive her ashore on Cape Tennant. The advance guard of the Night People, following the twilight belt in its slow march around Venus, would be there now. They were vicious, unconquered, untamed. *Probably, thought Porter, these fools of mutineers no more want to fall into their hands than we do . . .*

Aft, a ruddy effulgence through the driving snow, the glare of the flame throwers was more intense than ever. It was brighter now than the funnel exhaust, from which they were tapped. But it shouldn't be . . . It couldn't be . . . But it was.

Some freak of visibility, Porter comforted himself. And he paced up and down the starboard wing of his bridge, his mind busy with the strategy that he was working out, the possibility of a surprise attack on the after deck by way of the tunnel escape. The survival of Dillon and Lacon showed that it might, probably would,

work. It was extremely unlikely that the mutineers—especially with Quassa cut off from them on the bridge—would think to post a guard on the poop.

The glare from aft was brighter now. Porter stopped his restless pacing, stood and stared astern. But the snow was heavy and all that he could see was huge black shadows moving against the evil radiance, all that he could hear was confused shouting and an incessant rattle of pistol fire. Then, suddenly, long streamers of crimson flame roared along the boatdeck, driven with blow-torch ferocity by the following gale. With them came great flying masses of burning matter, Hell's witches riding flaming broomsticks down the storm. The wind deflector apron of the bridge was some protection—the flames and the blazing, wind borne grass lifted, cleared the bridge to fall forward, some in the sea, some on the fo'c'sle head.

There was a clattering of feet on ladders. Dillon appeared, beating out a smouldering coat, and Carter. Some of the engineers—those not on duty below—were there. There were three of the quartermasters.

"Your men!" cried Porter. "Where are the rest of the men?"

"Safe, sir," replied Dillon. "More by luck than judgment. We couldn't get into the accommodation—all the doors are shut by the wheelhouse controls. We were chased along the boatdeck by the fire. But the crowd are all right. They're sheltering in the lee of the bridge house. There's a party under the Bo's'n to deal with any fires that may start on the fore deck. And the Second Engineer has gone for'ard with Chippy to get some tools."

"How did the fire start?"

"It was when that fool in there blew the siren. You know how the deck cargo was stowed—piled on after hatches and almost out to the rails, but with a sort of pit over each hatch to give clearance for the skylights. They were fighting from the pit over the Number Four Skylight; it was damn' fine cover for them. Then, when the whistle went, they started pushing bales from the forward rim of the pit to fill the gap between Number Four hatch and the boat deck. It was about fifteen feet, as you know, a little too far to jump . . .

"Somehow the stuff caught. It didn't catch too easily; the top bales were sodden with half melted snow. A bale must have been pushed, or dropped, right into the jets from one of the flame throwers. They're down to the light stuff now—the bales that are still dry. The wind's catching 'em, rolling 'em over and over to the boat deck. And they're blazing up at the slightest spark, and . . . Well, look for yourself, sir.

"And they're quite safe unless we manage to alter course, or the wind shifts. The fire's eating back a little, but not much, and they're working like fiends to wind'ard of it to get all the cargo shifted up for'ard . . ."

IT WAS still snowing, but what fell was sooty rain, almost scalding hot. The air was rapidly becoming unbreathable. And still the ship lurched and wallowed in the following sea, still the wind, bearing ice and fire, roared upon them from dead astern. Porter wondered how long it would be before the carpenter and the engineers managed to force the wheelhouse doors, or before those shut in amidships—the engineers at their stations, the surgeon and his staff, the radio officer still trying to raise somebody on his all but useless transmitter—realized what was amiss and broke into the wheelhouse from the officers' flat. Perhaps they were trying now. Perhaps the wind would shift. Sudden changes of wind at this season of the year, at this time of the year long day, were possible. A beam wind, aided by the fire fighting parties, would soon sweep the decks clear of flame. A head wind—and the primitive engineers would be hoist with their own petard. Meanwhile, was that bloody wood butcher making the tools?

The wood butcher and the Second Engineer staggered up to the bridge. They were lugging a heavy bag that clinked metallically as they dropped it on to the deck. "A drill, I think, Second," suggested the Carpenter. "Ay, Chippy. Ha'e we any sockets tae plug intae?"

The nearest, of course, was in the wheelhouse. Failing that, there was a deck-light on either side of the officers' house, just under the bridge. The switch for these lights was in the wheelhouse. Had Quassa known the use to which it was

proposed to put them he would have switched off. But all that he did know, all that he could know inside his armoured fortress-prison, was that his plan was succeeding, that the hated humans were being burned out of their own ship.

The Captain and the Engineer and the Carpenter—the latter uncoiling a length of insulated cable—went to the wing of the bridge, looked down at the light, shining behind its transparent shield, that was their only chance of salvation. The superheated wind scorched their faces, a vicious gust of sparks made them screw their eyes tight shut. But they saw how long streamers of roaring flame licked along the side of the house, seemed to impinge directly upon the spot where a man must stand to unscrew the cover, push home the bayonet plug.

Chippy started to edge reluctantly towards the ladder down to the boat deck. And then the cable was snatched from his hand. It was Dillon who took it from him. He had removed his hooded coat, soaked it in the pool of melted snow that had collected over a choked scupper in the wing of the bridge, replaced it. He had tied a saturated muffler around the lower part of his face. He had taken a wrench and a screwdriver from the tool bag.

"No, Mr. Dillon!" cried Chippy. "I'll—"

"No you won't. You're too long making up your mind."

The Second Officer ran down the ladder, his wet gloves steaming and sizzling on the handrail. He flung up his arm to shield his face, plunged into the smoke and sparks and the lurid roaring flames.

Porter groaned, "He'll never make it . . ."

ON the bridge there were only the Captain, the Second Officer, the Second Engineer, the Carpenter. And Quassa. But he, so far as they could see through the narrow observation slits, was dead.

The carpenter slipped a bit into the chuck of his drill, clicked futilely at the trigger switch. The Captain looked at the silent drill, at the carpenter's seamed face, shrugged and turned his back. The Second Engineer got a hammer and a punch out of the bag, placed the punch carefully, and prepared the face of the door around the lock to receive the drill. "Hae ye no current yet?"

The carpenter shook his head. "Get to it wi' yer cold chisel, mon," he said.

The Second Engineer looked at him, at the tempered steel door, caught his lip in his teeth and turned to the tool bag. How long would it take to chip through the metal? Six hours? Eight?

"Captain," said the engineer, "There's anither outlet below, in the shelter-deck. Let me haul in the cable, sir, an' nip doon wi' it."

"Stay where you are," snapped the Captain. "Dillon's working on the deck-light cover now, if he's alive. You want to snatch the plug out of his hand just as he gets to the outlet?"

"If he's alive, sir . . ."

THE Captain stepped aft and looked across at the hell that was roaring up the boat deck. It was no less than the inferno below, in the shelter deck, where the carpenter proposed to go.

"Get to your chiselling, for a while at least."

"Aye, sir."

Porter paced the deck—fire aft, ice forward, the skin of his cheeks protesting the extremes. A billow of fat-grass smoke swept chokingly through the group, leaving eyes streaming and hands unsteady. The steady click of hammer against chisel continued. Once it missed a beat, and the carpenter grunted as the steel struck his hand.

Porter ranged up to them, looked at the tragically small pit in the door from which the spining crumbs were being gouged. He shook his head. Dillon should have had time . . . but Dillon was gone. A good man. An expression which was almost a smile crossed the Captain's face. "Things drop . . ." Well, Dillon was cured. He'd drop nothing more.

Porter peered into the wheelhouse. Quassa had not moved. There was a puddle of ichor round the ruined feet. The creature must be dead. He must have been all but dead when he entered the wheelhouse. The Captain marveled at the native's strength of will. It was obvious now that the revolt was Quassa's doing, probably planned far ahead, from the time when a series of ugly accidents had made him Kemp's servant. He wondered how much Quassa had had to do

with the sudden sickness of Wallis, the guard officer whose place Kemp had taken.

But—the sheer ingenuity of that semi-reptilian mind! He might, in some other culture, have made a great general. He had foresight, and his action in saving the two officers in order to gain access to the bridge showed that he had the ability to think quickly, to seize the opportunity of the moment. The injury to his feet was not in his plans . . . what might he have done had he been able to move-about in the wheelhouse? As it was, he had been able to lock the officers out and away from the controls, and signal his compatriots to pile up the deck cargo so that they might storm the bridge. The fire was not in his plans, either, apparently, though from what it was doing it might well have been . . .

Quassa was an unusual native, certainly, but certainly not unique. Porter, like any good commander, was capable of an impartial judgment of the enemy. He knew enough history, too, to remember that greatness is a matter for posterity to judge. George Washington was a mutineer; Sir Francis Drake was a pirate; Schott, the pioneer of the spaceways, had been a brutal megalomaniac; yet all these were considered heroes.

A race which produced a Quassa was entitled to better treatment than the herding and flogging to which it was being subjected. At long last, the pressures within the Captain that had manifested themselves in disgust and distaste for his cargoes, centered themselves on a disgust for slave-trading itself.

Totally foreign to his usual habit, he swore a great oath and smashed his fist down into his palm.

The Second Engineer looked up, startled. "What is it, Sir?"

"The trade," said the Captain. "The dirty, inhuman slave-trade. Second, be my witness. If I get out of this alive, I shall swallow the anchor before I ever again take out a slave ship."

"Ah, sir; but you are too high in the game. Too many others'll follow ye if you do that. It'll mean the end o' slavin' on Venus!"

"I'll tell that to my conscience," said the Captain bitterly, "and good riddance to the filthy business!"

HE turned and walked to the observation slit, more to present his back to the men than to see inside. He got his churning thoughts together and pushed them away. With his eye still to the slit, he spoke. "Chips."

"Aye, sir."

"Haul in the wire. Want to chance it to the shelterdeck?"

"Aye, aye, sir." The chiselling stopped. A moment later, "Captain! Mr. Dillon must ha' made fast to summat yonder. I canna budge the cable."

Surprisingly, for him, the Captain swore. "The poor devil must have secured it while he was working on the cover, and then died before he could plug it in. Who'll volunteer to follow the cable out there and finish the job?"

Both the others spoke, rushed to drench their coats. "One will do," said the captain.

The engineer held up a fist. "Odds!" he said, grinning. The carpenter returned the grin, held up a fist. The fists came down, fingers came out. Two for the carpenter, three for the engineer. "Fives, and odd it is," said the engineer. "See you at tea-time, Chippy!"

The captain turned away, back to the observation slit. Brave, brave, he thought . . . "Stop!" he roared.

The engineer, his hand on the cable, stopped at the corner of the wheelhouse. The Captain bellowed something over the roar of the flames and the wind, the hissing of ice and spray turning to steam. He beckoned.

The three pressed to the slot and stared inside.

The opposite door was a rectangle of light. Through it hurtled a dark, tottering figure—"Dillon!" breathed the Captain.

The second officer, reeling, his clothes smoking, threw himself on the wheel. The three who watched broke away together, ran for the other side of the wheelhouse and the open door. At the starboard corner they stopped, shrank back from the hot fury of the flames. "Wait!" shouted Porter. "He'll swing her!"

And swing she did. Slowly, dreadfully, the wind came around to the quarter. The flames and the smoke and the cascading sparks were shooting overside—at first

at an angle only a degree or so from the ship's longitudinal axis, but ever broadening. Now they were wide on the beam. Now they were going astern. And then, at last, the wind was right ahead, and the bows were dipping and plunging and sending up and aft great clouds of icy spray that froze as it fell—and the afterdeck was an inferno in which nothing could live—in which nothing did live. "Th' lad's done it!" cried the carpenter. "Mr. Dillon has swung the ship an' put the fire back on the devils!"

The three behind the wheelhouse sprinted over the glowing, cooling deck and tumbled inside.

Porter drew his pistol, went straight to the huddled, contorted body of Quassa. He approached cautiously at first, tried to stir the dead Venusian with a heavily boot-ed foot. Then, his fears partially allayed, he put away his gun, made a more gentle, more thorough examination. Satisfied, he got up slowly from his stooping position. The flicking, vicious light in Quassa's brain had gone out.

"She won't answer, sir!" called the carpenter.

Porter sprang to the wheel. Dillon lay on the deck beneath it, his eyes open and rolled up, with only the whites showing, unconscious or dead . . . The captain's eyes flicked to the Iron Mike, to the controls. Over the bank of switches which were wired to the gyro room was a clutter of sodden cloth—Dillon's coat and muffler, which he had flung off when he came in. The Captain ripped them off, and laughed aloud with the release of tension. "Things drop!" he shouted. "After he swung her, his coat dropped on the board and switched back to automatic control!" He flipped the switch to "Manual" and steadied the vessel into the wind. Then, "Take her, Chips. Watch the spray and keep her headed into the wind while we make a check."

"It dropped . . ." someone said faintly. The Captain knelt beside the Second Officer.

"Dillon! Are you . . ."

Dillon sat up, put a cautious hand to his face. "A bit broiled, sir," he said. He sat up and weakly shook his head. From the expression on his face he deeply regretted having done so. "The mutiny—"

"Finished with," said the Captain, "thanks to you. How did you get that door open?"

Dillon rose, gratefully accepting his Captain's help, flushed, and said, "I was a little clumsy, I suppose, sir."

"Clumsy, man? You saved us and the ship!"

Dillon wet his lips. "I got to the decklight, sir. Tried to hold the plug in my armpit while I worked the cover loose. It—ah—it dropped, sir."

"The cover?"

"No, sir. The plug. The cable. It dropped on the deck and the wind swept it over the side. I got the cover off the light and when I went to plug in, there was no plug. I followed the cable to the rail." He wet his lips again. "It was—hot, sir. I pulled at the cable. It was fouled down below decks, some where—probably on the Y-bracing of the davits. There seemed to be nothing I could do. I pulled at it and it wouldn't clear. It was too hot to make it back to the wheelhouse. I dived for cover, nearest place I could find."

The Captain helped him over to the chartroom settee. "Go on," he said tonelessly.

"Thank you, sir. I was standing right next to number Four boat. I opened the falls-box and jumped in and closed the cover. It was hot and stuffy there but I was out of the flame."

"There was something hard poking into my kidneys. I felt around to shift it. It was the electric screw-jack that's stowed there to lift the boat clear of the keel-blocks."

"Hold on, Second," said the Captain. "When you lost the plug from the drill-cable, why didn't you come back and report?"

"I—I couldn't," said Dillon, and flushed again. "You have told me before, sir, that one day I would drop one thing too many, and this looked like it. I'm sorry, sir, but I suppose I just couldn't face it."

The Captain's jaw knotted. "Go on."

"Well, sir, it suddenly occurred to me that the screw-jack was just what the doctor ordered. I hopped out of the box, scooped out the jack, swung it over to the wheelhouse, and jammed it between the door and the stanchion. I plugged it into

the decklight that I'd cleared before, and simply switched on."

"That jack weighs two hundred pounds!" exclaimed Porter.

"Somehow, sir," said Dillon, passing a hand over his forehead, "I didn't seem to notice that at all. Anyhow, once it began to turn, something had to give. I was afraid for a moment that it would be the stanchion, but happily the lock let go first."

"Fine work," said the captain. "Ah—Dillon. Tell me—did you strip off your coat and muffler before you took the wheel?"

"Why, sir? I—let me see. No, sir I took off my coat, switched the control to 'Manual' and then took the wheel."

"Yes. I saw that." The Captain leaned back. "Mr. Dillon, things—ah—things drop. You threw your coat on the board. It fell and switched back to automatic." He threw up his hands. "After all that—if I may say so—heroic effort and ingenuity, you, Two-Oh, let your coat drop on the controls and cancelled all your efforts. When you swung that wheel *it was disconnected!*"

"But I—but, sir, the ship—"

Porter nodded. "The ship swung, the fire was blown aft, and—there is no more mutiny. Mister, we have work to do, but I shall expect an accounting afterward. Someone swung the ship's head into the wind, and I don't expect Providence to operate in the slave trade. Are you fit for work?"

"I think so, sir," said Dillon in an awed tone.

"Then check your gyros. Heaven knows where we are."

"Aye, sir."

TWENTY MINUTES later, the bridge phone jangled. "Second Officer, sir, in the gyro room aft. Could you step this way, sir?"

Captain Porter, in the midst of course and dead-reckoning calculations, forced his eyes from the P. P. I. and said, "Won't it wait, man?"

"I—I think it's vital, sir." Dillon's tone, in spite of its flat telephonic quality, held such a quantity of shame and tension that the captain found himself smiling. Keeping the smile out of his voice, he rapped,

"Very well, mister. Meet me at the after companionway."

Dillon reported how, carelessly, he had forgotten to replace the cover after his last routine inspection. In justice to himself it must be said that this same memory had first come to the surface, uncomfortably nagging, whilst he had been aft with Lacon, streaming the log. And then had come the mutiny and the fire and the fighting . . .

He had left the cover propped against a stanchion. It was easy to see what had happened—a roll or lurch, the quite heavy plastic and metal casing falling against the gyroscope, the inevitable precession, continuing until such time as the cover slid free. The ship was on automatic, and controlled by this gyro. When the pressure of the cover caused the gyro to precess, it turned on its gimbals; and when it turned, it swung the ship, blowing the flames back on the mutineers, who even now cowered in their accommodation, their spirit and their mutiny broken.

Scarlet faced, and acutely conscious of his own professional inadequacy, Dillon stammered out his story to the Captain. At the end there was brief flash of the old nonchalance. He tried to grin. He said, with maddening vagueness, "Things drop . . ." Then he stood, shuffling his feet like a shamed schoolboy.

Porter looked at him, at the man who had heroically entered the wheelhouse to save the ship, only to have his heroism negated by his clumsiness in dropping his coat on the switches. He looked at the master gyro, subject of the same man's clumsi-

ness, which had succeeded where the man had failed. "Things drop . . ."

"Just as well they do," Porter conceded reluctantly. "Ah—shall we forget about this?"

He turned abruptly so that Dillon could not see that he was on the verge of hysterical laughter. He stepped through the door and closed it, to lean against the bulkhead for a brief, deeply pensive moment.

Captain Porter was as hard-headed an old shellback as ever sailed. And yet, as a philosopher once said, "No man will follow the sea unless he is mystic." Porter would have blown up and withered away any man who charged him with mysticism; and yet deep within him stirred the line "*. . . in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform. . .*" He thought of his oath, and of the effect it would have on the Venusian slave-trade. He thought of Quassa, who was dead, who had failed in his supreme try, and yet who, through the miracle of Dillon's clumsiness and the Captain's decision, would win ultimately. Half-way between laughter and solemn awe, he moved up the alleyway toward his bridge, the vantage point from which he surveyed the little kingdom of which he still was king. Behind him he heard a crash, the unpleasant clamour of machinery protesting against sudden and violent stoppage. He hastened back.

The Second Officer, replacing the heavy cover, had once again proved the truth of his favorite statement.

Things do, indeed, have a way of dropping.

ALL-AMERICAN FOOTBALL MAGAZINE

OFFERS 'A MENU OF SOLID GRIDIRON DISHES . . .
HARD-CHARGING, FAST-MOVING PIGSKIN SAGAS . . .
WRITTEN BY A TEAM OF ALL-AMERICAN AUTHORS

FICTION AND FACT

ON SALE NOW AT YOUR FAVORITE NEWSSTAND

Asleep in Armageddon

By RAY BRADBURY



He leaped up, raving. What was going on?

Avoid Planetoid 787. Lush and sunny, with fine air and no dangerous beasts, it'll tempt you to curve in for some nice solid-ground sleep. DON'T!

YOU DON'T WANT DEATH and you don't expect death. Something goes wrong, your rocket tilts in space, a planetoid jumps up, blackness, movement, hands over the eyes, a violent pulling back of available power in the fore-jets, the crash . . .

The darkness. In the darkness, the senseless pain. In the pain, the nightmare.

He was not unconscious.

Your name? asked hidden voices. *Sale*, he replied in whirling nausea. *Leonard Sale. Occupation*, cried the voices. *Space-man!* he cried, alone in the night. *Wel-*

come, said the voices. *Welcome, welcome.* They faded.

He stood up in the wreckage of his ship. It lay like a folded, tattered garment around him.

The sun rose and it was morning.

Sale pried himself out the small airlock and stood breathing the atmosphere. Luck. Sheer luck. The air was breathable. An instant's checking showed him that he had two month's supply of food with him. Fine, fine! And this—he fingered at the wreckage. Miracle of miracles! The radio was intact.

He stuttered out the message on the

sending key. CRASHED ON PLANE-
TOID 787. SALE. SEND HELP.
SALE. SEND HELP.

The reply came instantly: HELLO,
SALE. THIS IS ADDAMS IN MARS-
PORT. SENDING RESCUE SHIP
LOGARITHM. WILL ARRIVE
PLANETOID 787 IN SIX DAYS.
HANG ON.

Sale did a little dance.

It was simple as that. One crashed.
One had food. One radioed for help. Help
came. *La!* He clapped his hands.

The sun rose and was warm. He felt
no sense of mortality. Six days would be
no time at all. He would eat, he would
read, he would sleep. He glanced at his
surroundings. No dangerous animals; a
tolerable oxygen supply. What more
could one ask. Beans and bacon, was the
answer. The happy smell of breakfast
filled the air.

After breakfast he smoked a cigarette
slowly, deeply, blowing out. He nodded
contentedly. What a life! Not a scratch
on him. Luck. Sheer luck.

His head nodded. Sleep, he thought.

Good idea. Forty winks. Plenty of
time to sleep, take it easy. Six whole
long, luxurious days of idling and philos-
ophizing. Sleep.

He stretched himself out, tucked his
arm under his head, and shut his eyes.

INSANITY came in to take him. The
voices whispered.

Sleep, yes, sleep, said the voices. *Ah,
sleep, sleep.*

He opened his eyes. The voices stopped.
Everything was normal. He shrugged.
He shut his eyes casually, fitfully. He
settled his long body.

Eeeeeeeeeee, sang the voices, far away.

Ahhhhhhhh, sang the voices.

Sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sang the
voices.

Die, die, die, die, die, sang the voices.

Ooooooooooooooooo, cried the voices.

Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm, a bee ran
through his brain.

He sat up. He shook his head. He
put his hands to his ears. He blinked at
the crashed ship. Hard metal. He felt
the solid rock under his fingers. He saw
the real sun warming the blue sky.

Let's try sleeping on our back, he

thought. He adjusted himself, lying back
down. His watch ticked on his wrist.
The blood burned in his veins.

Sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sang the
voices.

Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, sang the voices.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, sang the voices.

Die, die, die, die, die. *Sleep, sleep, die,
sleep, die, sleep, die!* *Oohhh. Ahhhhh.*
Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

Blood tapped in his ears. The sound
of the wind rising.

Mine, mine, said a voice. *Mine, mine,
he's mine!*

No, mine, mine, said another voice. *No,
mine, mine; he's mine!*

No, ours, ours, sang ten voices. *Ours,
ours, he's ours!*

His fingers twitched. His jaws spasmed.
His eyelids jerked.

At last, at last, sang a high voice. *Now,
now. The long time, the waiting. Over,
over,* sang the high voice. *Over, over at
last!*

It was like being undersea. Green
songs, green visions, green time. Bubbled
voices drowning in deep liquors of sea
tide. Far away choruses chanting sense-
less rhymes. Leonard Sale stirred in
agony.

Mine, mine, cried a loud voice. *Mine,
mine!* shrieked another. *Ours, ours!*
shrieked the chorus.

The din of metal, the crash of sword,
the conflict, the battle, the fight, the war.
All of it exploding, his mind fiercely torn
apart!

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

He leaped up, screaming. The land-
scape melted and flowed.

A voice said, "I am Tylle of Rathalar.
Proud Tylle, Tylle of the Blood Mound
and the Death Drum. Tylle of Rathalar,
Killer of Men!"

Another spoke, "I am Iorr of Wendillo,
Wise Iorr, Destroyer of Infidels!"

The chorus chanted. "And we the war-
riors, we the steel, we the warriors, we
the red blood rushing, the red blood fall-
ing, the red blood steaming in the sun—"

Leonard Sale staggered under the bur-
den. "Go away!" he cried. "Leave me,
in God's name, leave me!"

Eeeeeeeeeee, shrieked the high sound of
steel hot on steel.

Silence.

HE STOOD with the sweat boiling out of him. He was trembling so violently he could not stand. Insane, he thought. Absolutely insane. Raving insane. Insane.

He jerked the food kit open, did something to a chemical packet. Hot coffee was ready in an instant. He mouthed it, spilled gushes of it down his shirt. He shivered. He sucked in raw gulps of breath.

Let's be logical, he thought, sitting down heavily. The coffee seared his tongue. No record of insanity in the family for two hundred years. All healthy, well-balanced. No reason for insanity now. Shock? Silly. No shock. I'm to be rescued in six days. No shock to that. No danger. Just an ordinary planetoid. Ordinary, ordinary place. No reason for insanity. I'm sane.

Oh? cried a small metal voice within. An echo. Fading.

"Yes!" he cried, beating his fists together. "Sane!"

Hahahahahahahahahah. Somewhere a vanishing laughter.

He whirled about. "Shut up, you!" he cried.

We didn't say anything, said the mountains. We didn't say anything, said the sky. We didn't say anything, said the wreckage.

"All right then," he said, swaying. "See that you don't."

Everything was normal.

THE pebbles were getting hot. The sky was big and blue. He looked at his fingers and saw the way the sun burned on every black hair. He looked at his boots and the dust on them. Suddenly he felt very happy because he made a decision. I won't go to sleep, he thought. I'm having nightmares, so why sleep. There's your solution.

He made a routine. From nine o'clock in the morning, which was this minute, until twelve, he would walk around and see the planetoid. He would write on a pad with a yellow pencil everything he saw. Then he would sit down and open a can of oily sardines and some canned fresh bread with good butter on it. From twelve thirty until four he would read nine chapters of *War and Peace*. He took the

book from the wreckage, and laid it where he might find it later. There was a book of T. S. Eliot's poetry, too. That might be nice.

Supper would come at five-thirty and then from six until ten he would listen to the radio from Earth. There would be a couple of bad comedians telling jokes and a bad singer singing some song, and the latest news flashes, signing off at midnight with the UN anthem.

After that?

He felt sick.

I'll play solitaire until dawn, he thought. I'll sit up and drink hot black coffee and play solitaire, no cheating, until sunrise.

Ho ho, he thought.

"What did you say?" he asked himself.

"I said 'Ha ha,'" he replied. "Some time, you'll have to sleep."

"I'm wide awake," he said.

"Liar," he retorted, enjoying the conversation.

"I feel fine," he said.

"Hypocrite," he replied.

"I'm not afraid of the night, or sleep, or anything," he said.

"Very funny," he said.

He felt bad. He wanted to sleep. And the fact that he was afraid of sleep made him want to lie down all the more and shut his eyes and curl up. "Comfy-cozy?" asked his ironic censor.

"I'll just walk and look at the rocks and the geological formations and think how good it is to be alive," he said.

"Ye gods," cried his censor. "William Saroyan!"

You'll go on, he thought, maybe one day, maybe one night, but what about the next night and the next, and the next? Can you stay awake *all* that time, for six nights? Until the rescue ship comes? Are you *that* good, *that* strong?

The answer was no.

What are you afraid of? I don't know. Those voices. Those sounds. But they can't hurt you, can they?

They *might*. You've got to face them some time. Must I? Brace up to it, old man. Chin up, and all that rot.

He sat down on the hard ground. He felt very much like crying. He felt as if life was over and he was entering new and unknown territory. It was such a deceiving day, with the sun warm; phys-

ally, he felt able and well, one might fish on such a day as this, or pick flowers or kiss a woman or anything. But in the midst of a lovely day, what did one get? Death.

Well, hardly *that*.

Death, he insisted.

He lay down and closed his eyes. He was tired of messing around.

All right, he thought, if you *are* death, come get me. I want to know what all this damned nonsense is about.

Death came.

* * * * *

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee, said a voice.

Yes, I know, said Leonard Sale, lying there. But what else?

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh, said a voice.

I know that, also, said Leonard Sale, irritably. He turned cold. His mouth hung open wildly.

"I am Tylle of Rathalar, Killer of Men!"

"I am Iorr of Wendillo, Destroyer of Infidels!"

What is this place? asked Leonard Sale, struggling against horror.

"Once a mighty planet!" said Tylle of Rathalar.

"Once a place of battles!" said Iorr of Wendillo.

"Now dead," said Tylle.

"Now silent," said Iorr.

"Until you came," said Tylle.

"To give us life again," said Iorr.

You're dead, insisted Leonard Sale, flesh writhing. You're nothing but empty wind.

"We live, through you."

"And fight, through you!"

So that's it, thought Leonard Sale. I'm to be a battleground, am I? Are you friends?

"Enemies!" cried Iorr.

"Foul enemies!" cried Tylle.

LEONARD smiled a rictal smile. He felt ghastly. How long have you waited? he demanded.

"How long is time?" Ten thousand years? "Perhaps." Ten million years? "Perhaps."

What are you? Thoughts, spirits, ghosts? "All of those, and more." Intelligences? "Precisely." How did you survive?

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee, sang the chorus, far away.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh, sang another army, waiting to fight.

"Once upon a time, this was fertile land, a rich planet. And there were two nations, strong nations, led by two strong men. I, Iorr. And he, that one who calls himself Tylle. And the planet declined and gave way to nothingness. The peoples and the armies languished in the midst of a great war which had lasted five thousand years. We lived long lives and loved long loves, drank much, slept much, fought much. And when the planet died, our bodies withered, and, only in time, and with much science, did we survive."

Survive, wondered Leonard Sale. But there is nothing of you!

"Our *minds*, fool, our *minds*! What is a body without a mind?"

What is a mind without a *body*, laughed Leonard Sale. I've got you there. Admit it, I've got you!

"True," said the cruel voice. "One is useless lacking the other. But survival is survival even when unconscious. The minds of our nations, through science, through wonder, survived."

But without senses, lacking eyes, ears, lacking touch, smell, and the rest? "Lacking all those, yes. We were vapors, merely. For a long time. Until today."

And now I am here, thought Leonard Sale. "You are here," said the voice. "To give substance to our mentalities. To give us our needed body."

I'm only one, thought Sale. "Nevertheless, you are of use."

I'm an individual, thought Sale. I resent your intrusion.

"He resents our intrusion! Did you hear him, Iorr? He resents!"

"As if he had a right to resent!"

Be careful, warned Sale. I'll blink my eyes and you'll be gone, phantoms! I'll wake up and rub you out!

"But you'll have to sleep again, *some* time!" cried Iorr. "And when you do, we'll be here, waiting, waiting, waiting. For you."

What do you want? "Solidity. Mass. Sensation again." You can't *both* have it. "We'll fight that out between us."

A hot clamp twisted his skull. It was as if a spike had been thrust and beaten

he must warn them what sort of planet this was, this so innocent seeming spot of nightmare and fever vision—

He tapped on the radio key for a minute. His mouth tightened. The radio was dead.

It had sent through the proper rescue message, received a reply, and then extinguished itself.

The proper touch of irony, he thought. There was only one thing to do. Draw a plan.

This he did. He got a yellow pencil and delineated his six day plan of escape.

Tonight, he wrote, read six more chapters of *War and Peace*. At four in the morning have hot black coffee. At four-fifteen take cards from pack and play ten games of solitaire. This should take until six-thirty when—more coffee. At seven o'clock, listen to early morning programs from Earth, if the receiving equipment on the radio works at all. Does it?

He tried the radio receiver. It was dead.

Well, he wrote, from seven o'clock until eight, sing all the songs you remember, make your own entertainment. From eight until nine think about Helen King. Remember Helen. On second thought, think about Helen right now.

He marked that out with his pencil.

The rest of the days were set down in minute detail.

He checked the medical kit. There were several packets of tablets that would keep you awake. One tablet an hour every hour for six days. He felt quite confident.

"Here's mud in your evil eye, Iorr, Tylle!"

He swallowed one of the stay-wake tablets with a scalding mouth of black coffee.

WELL, with one thing and another it was Tolstoy or Balzac, gin-rummy, coffee, tablets, walking, more Tolstoy, more Balzac, more gin-rummy, more solitaire. The first day passed, as did the second and the third.

On the fourth day he lay quietly in the shade of a rock, counting to a thousand by fives, then by tens, to keep his mind occupied and awake. His eyes were so tired he had to bathe them frequently in cool water. He couldn't read, he was bothered with splitting headaches. He was so



Helen King

exhausted he couldn't move. He was numb with medicine. He resembled a waxen dummy, stuffed with things to preserve him in a state of horrified wakefulness. His eyes were glass, his tongue a rusted pike, his fingers felt as if they were gloved in needles and fur.

He followed the hand of his watch. One second less to wait, he thought. Two seconds, three seconds, four, five, ten, thirty seconds. A whole minute. Now an hour less time to wait. Oh, ship, hurry on thy appointed round!

He began to laugh softly.

What would happen if he just gave up, drifted off into sleep? Sleep, ah, sleep; perchance to dream. All the world a stage . . . What if he gave up the unequal struggle, lapsed down?

Eeeeeeeeeee, the high, shrill warning sound of battle metal.

He shivered. His tongue moved in his dry, burry mouth.

Iorr and Tylle would battle out their ancient battle.

Leonard Sale would become quite insane.

And whichever won the battle, would take this ruin of an insane man, the shaking, laughing wild body, and wander it across the face of this world for ten, twenty years, occupying it, striding in it, pompous, holding court, making grand gestures, ordering heads severed, calling on inward unseen dancing girls. Leonard Sale, what remained of him, would be led off to some hidden cave, there to be infested with wars and worms of wars for twenty insane years, occupied and prostituted by old and outlandish thoughts.

When the rescue ship arrived it would find nothing. Sale would be hidden somewhere by a triumphant army in his head. Hidden in some cleft of rock, placed there like a nest for Iorr to lie upon in evil occupation.

The thought of it almost broke him in half.

Twenty years of insanity. Twenty years of torture, doing what you don't want to do. Twenty years of wars raging and being split apart, twenty years of nausea and trembling.

His head sank down between his knees. His eyes snapped and cracked and made soft noises. His eardrum popped tiredly.

Sleep, sleep, sang soft sea voices.

I'll—I'll make a proposition with you, listen, thought Leonard Sale. You, Iorr, you, too, Tylle! Iorr, you can occupy me on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Tylle, you can take me over on Sundays, Tuesdays and Saturdays. Thursday is maid's night out. Okay?

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee, sang the sea tides, seething in his brain.

Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, sang the distant voices softly, soft.

What'll you say, is it a *bargain*, Iorr, Tylle?

No, said a voice.

No, said another.

Greedy, both of you, greedy! complained Sale. A pox on both your houses! He slept.

HE was Iorr, jeweled rings on his hands. He arose beside his rocket and held out his fingers, commanding blind armies. He was Iorr, ancient ruler of jeweled warriors.

He was Tylle, lover of women, killer of dogs!

With some hidden bit of awareness, his hand crept to the holster at his hip. The sleeping hand withdrew the gun there. The hand lifted, the gun pointed.

The armies of Tylle and Iorr gave battle.

The gun exploded.

The bullet tore across Sale's forehead, waking him.

He stayed awake for another six hours, getting over his latest siege. He knew it to be hopeless now. He washed and bandaged the wound he had given himself. He wished he had aimed straighter and it was all over. He watched the sky. Two more days. Two more. Come on, ship, come on. He was heavy with sleeplessness.

No use. At the end of six hours he was raving badly. He took the gun up and put it down and took it up again, put it against his head, tightened his hand on the trigger, changed his mind, looked at the sky again.

Night settled. He tried to read, threw the book away. He tore it up and burned it, just to have something to do.

So tired. In another hour, he decided. If nothing happens, I'll kill myself. This is for certain now. I'll *do* it, this time.

He got the gun ready and laid it on the ground next to himself.

He was very calm now, though tired. It would be over and done. He would be dead.

He watched the minute hand of his watch. One minute, five minutes, twenty-five minutes.

The flame appeared on the sky.

It was so unbelievable he started to cry. "A rocket," he said, standing up. "A rocket!" he cried, rubbing his eyes. He ran forward.

The flame brightened, grew, came down.

He waved frantically, running forward, leaving his gun, his supplies, everything behind. "You *see* that, Iorr, Tylle! You savages, you monsters, I beat you! I *won*! They're coming to rescue me now! I've won, damn you."

He laughed harshly at the rocks and the sky and the backs of his hands.

The rocket landed. Leonard Sale stood

swaying, waiting for the door to lid open.

"Goodbye, Iorr, goodbye, Tylle!" he shouted in triumph, grinning, eyes hot.

Eeeeeee, sang a diminishing roar in time. Ahhhhhhh, voices faded.

The rocket flipped wide its air-lock. Two men jumped out.

"Sale?" they called. "We're Ship ACDN13. Intercepted your SOS and decided to pick you up ourselves. The Marsport ship won't get through until day after tomorrow. We want a spot of rest ourselves. Thought it'd be good to spend the night here, pick you up, and go on."

"No," said Sale, face melting with terror. "No spend night——"

He couldn't talk. He fell to the ground.

"Quick," said a voice, in the bleary vortex over him. "Give him a shot of food liquid, another of sedative. He needs sustenance and rest."

"No rest!" screamed Sale.

"Delirious," said one man softly.

"No sleep!" screamed Sale.

"There, there," said the man gently. A needle poked into Sale's arm.

Sale thrashed. "No sleep, go!" he mouthed horribly. "Oh, go!"

"Delirious," said one man. "Shock."

"No sedative!" screamed Sale.

The sedative flowed into him.

Eeeeeeeeeee, sang the ancient winds.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhh, sang the ancient seas.

"No sedative, no sleep, please, don't, don't!" screamed Sale, trying to get up. "You don't——understand!"

"Take it easy, old man, you're safe among us now, nothing to worry about," said the rescuer above him.

Leonard Sale slept. The two men stood over him.

As they watched, Sale's features changed violently. He groaned and cried and snarled in his sleep. His face was riven with emotion. It was the face of a saint, a sinner, a fiend, a monster, a darkness, a light, one, many, an army, a vacuum, all, all!

He writhed in his sleep.

Eeeeeeeee! the sound burst from his mouth. Ahhhhhhhhhhh! he screamed.

"What's wrong with him?" asked one of the two rescuers.

"I don't know. More sedative?"

"More sedative. Nerves. He needs more sleep."

They stuck the needle in his arm. Sale writhed and spat and moaned.

Then, suddenly, he was dead.

He lay there, the two men over him. "What a shame," said one of them. "Can you figure that?"

"Shock. Poor guy. What a pity." They covered his face. "Did you ever see a face like that?"

"Totally insane."

"Loneliness. Shock."

"Yes. Lord, what an expression. I hope never to see a face like that again."

"What a shame, waiting for us, and we arrive, and he dies anyway."

They glanced around. "What shall we do? Shall we spend the night?"

"Yes. It's good to be out of the ship."

"We'll bury him first, of course."

"Naturally."

"And spend the night in the open, with good air, right? Good to be in the open again. After two weeks in that damned ship."

"Right. I'll find a spot for him. You start supper, eh?"

"Done."

"Should be good sleeping tonight."

"Fine, fine."

They made a grave and said a word over it. They drank their evening coffee silently. They smelled the sweet air of the planet and looked at the lovely sky and the bright and beautiful stars.

"What a night," they said, lying down.

"Pleasant dreams," said one, rolling over.

And the other replied, "Pleasant dreams."

They slept.



A Fiction House Magazine





The Death From Orion

By W. J. MATTHEWS

FOR A LONG MINUTE THE BIG man did not speak, rocking gently on his heels, hands clasped behind his broad back. The dim glow of the atomics in the corridor cast shadowy bars of gold and sable across his cold face, picked glints of steel and silver from his heavy gunbelt and saffron uniform. The only sound was the gentle tinkle of leg-irons as the prisoner lounging on the cell-bench idly swung his crossed leg, returning the heavier man's reptilian stare with a detached, infuriating coolness.

It moved him to break his silent regard. The thick voice rasped in the dim-lit cell.

"You know why I am here, Kurland?"

The black-bearded outlaw shrugged, a glitter of white teeth splintering his calm stare.

"Were you other than Gion, Marward

of Jupiter, I should know. As it is, I do not."

Gion's hard lips smiled briefly at the iron compliment.

"I rate you higher than you think, Kurland. I should have come farther still to see you hanged at dawn."

The outlaw shrugged. "I might say the same, had I had your luck."

The big man nodded, his eyes never leaving Kurland. The sharp brows over his enormous eyes lay straight and commanding, and there were lines about his tight mouth Kurland had never seen. Slowly, softly, Gion went on, rocking easily on his booted heels.

"Suppose, came dawn, you did not hang, Kurland?"

The swinging leg halted, the big body tensed in its chains. Then slowly Kur-



The outlaw stiffened, then his knees buckled.

Tiny suns set in rare metals, crystals of fire that mocked Terra's diamonds and pearls as lusterless pebbles and pale glass, the ancient treasure left behind the same time-worn trail of sudden blood and stiffening corpses!

land eased back against the cold stone wall, a thin, mocking smile playing across his face.

"You should know me better, Gion. I am not for sale, even at such a price. Nor my comrades."

Cold pride flashed in Marward's eyes. "I buy no man's loyalty," he retorted. "Were yours for sale, I should not be here, nor would you. I offer a supposition, nothing more."

Kurland rose, a powerful, black-clad figure imposing even in torn uniform and clinking chains. He stared fiercely at the heavy sub-ruler of the outer Jovian plains, the iron-souled tyrant who had broken and suborned Earthly sway until much of the giant planet lay supine and trembling before him.

"You have not come to taunt me, nor

play with suppositions, Marward. Why not be plain?"

"I shall be plain enough," promised Gion, dropping a hand upon the heavy butt of his silver-mounted glare-pistol. Kurland's teeth flashed in the gloom. There was magic still in his flaming name.

"You know the Jewels of Orion?"

"I have heard of them."

"They have vanished."

The outlaw shrugged, half a laugh breaking through his beard. "My regrets, Marward. I had no hand in it."

Gion bared his teeth wolfishly. "I did."

Bland astonishment swept Kurland's face. Then, slowly, a grim smile thrust aside his wonder.

"Forgive my start, Marward. You have stolen so much."

Fiercely Gion brushed aside the cold

insult. He stepped back, his face in shadow. The prison cell was electric with his vibrant hate. "You will have it, will you, Kurland? I came to make an offer."

"Go on," said the outlaw, immobile.

"I am not loved, here on Jupiter," said Gion. "I usurp the authority of greater men. I intrigue, I plot. I conquer and steal, if you will. It requires gold. A fortune." He paused, watching the outlaw. "An agent on Venus flashed me word that the Jewels of Orion, crown jewels of a vanished race on some forgotten planet beyond the stars, were to be shipped once more to Betelgoran. A hundred fortunes, Kurland. I gave orders and he shipped as passenger, with the consigned jewels."

"And then?" Kurland's eyes burned through the gloom.

"The *Plutonian* crashed somewhere ten million miles out in space," said Gion slowly. "My agent. He died with her, and with her people. But he sent the co-ordinates through even as she went down on some uncharted asteroid. I know where the hulk lies piled, an iron coffin for the Orion jewels."

Kurland's glare was deadly. "Make your offer, vulture."

"Go and bring me the jewels."

KURLAND flung back his head, a sudden roar of laughter in his muscled throat. The chains clashed on wrist and ankle as he flung derision in the other's paling face.

"You send a wolf on a jackal's errand, Marward! You think I would return, or venture one lean hungry mile on such a rat's voyage to help you on your way, you whom I have fought these many months, you who broke and exiled me, you who made me outlaw and today must hang me for it?" His scorn rasped bitingly in the prison cell, but Gion of Jupiter was not moved by the love or hate of men. He nodded to the tiny barred window.

"Look from the window."

Kurland looked, seeing in the growing pearl of dawn the black and ugly shapes athwart the sky were six gibbets stood ranged along the ramparts of Gion's northern fortress in the Montral foothills.

"You understand," nodded Gion, leaning against the door. "You will return,

and with the jewels, or your five young companions will be swinging there to greet you when my men take you, as they took you once before, Kurland."

The outlaw turned, ice-veined, but Gion did not stir.

"I am a prisoner. Judged and doomed. No ship, no crew."

"Escapes have been arranged before."

Kurland surveyed the big man curiously. "Why not go yourself on this golden errand, Marward?"

Gion shrugged. "Leaving my empire to the wolves? You know I dare not, nor trust a lieutenant in my place. This is not a secret for friends or followers."

"I am no friend of yours. You dare trust me?"

"Outlaw, fugitive, renegade . . . need I fear you, Kurland?" smiled Gion coolly. "My word against yours."

Kurland nodded slowly. "I see. But should I return with the jewels, what assurance have I that my crew and I do not instantly decorate your gallows yonder?"

"None," admitted Gion. "Reliance upon my word, I imagine, would give you scant comfort, but it is not to my interest to have even the slightest suspicion turned upon me while the jewels are in my possession. Compared to them, you and your arrogant little band are not worth the snapping of a broken twig. Bring me the Orions, Kurland, and your five slip the noose with a day's grace to be beyond my grasp. What more do you require?"

"A ship and my crew to man her," replied Kurland, steadily. "I am your enemy forever, Gion."

Gion smiled, not without malice. "If you will have it so, Kurland. I am a bad enemy."

"You used me once too often, Gion. I was an honest man when first my ships came trading here, too stiff to crawl to your thieving crew, too callow to stomach your vicious thrust to power. Exiled, dishonored, branded, I bear a prouder title than yours, Marward. I am your enemy."

"Serve me, then, and I promise you scant reward," Gion calmly agreed. "Your ship lies in the hangar, beyond the outer towers. Fueled. The chart is marked, your course is set. There are no guards."

Kurland suggestively clanked his chains.

Gion stepped into the corridor, his heavy face set and intent. Drawing his gun, he leveled a short tube with his left hand, focussing it on Kurland's chains through the doorway grill. As the outlaw pulled, links parted like melted cheese in the tinted purple glow.

"There will be reprimands and stern punishments that you were allowed to conceal a dis-tube about your person," explained Gion, holding Kurland motionless with the threat of his leveled gun. "You comprehend. Your companions will be spared, that you be hanged together on your recapture. There will be no questions, no suspicion. On your return, you will place the jewels beneath the seat where you have lain, taking the key you will find there to release your men. Vanish, Kurland. Stay beyond my power. Expect no mercy, for justice shall be no more swift and certain to punish your crimes than I to still your tongue for once and all. You have your warning."

"You make yourself quite plain," agreed the outlaw, hand on hip. "We understand one another, Marward of Jupiter. You shall have your mangy jewels. Nothing else."

Gion laughed contemptuously. "Have you seen them, wolf's-head? What else do I need?"

"Friends, Marward,"

"I have an enemy," Gion mocked, vanishing up the dimlit corridor in a blur of fading saffron. His throaty laugh came thickly back to Kurland as the clicking lock swung the heavy door gently wide.

Kurland was through it instantly, alert for a treacherous blast, darting into the shadows of the poor stone corridor, patched and ragged with broken plaster and creeping moss. Gion had vanished, but he did not dare venture anything in that direction, bearing as he did the lives of all his captive crew. Softly he passed down the empty corridors to the broad upper court overlooking the hillside ramparts.

His broad chest swelled with the fresh breath of freedom, strained though it might be through the rude beams of the new-made gallows he was cheating. The cords along his bearded jaw tightened. His hands found a tiny pill in a slot of his bread belt, pressed it swiftly against

the unguarded wood of the gallows. He melted into the shadows of the stairs as a wave of heat and acrid smoke billowed out, engulfing him and hiding him from view. The startled guards in the towers above saw the tall gibbets wreathed in sudden consuming flame even as they started.

Rushing to the conflagration, none saw the shadowy figure dart through the postern far below and vanish into the rocks fringing the landing ground at the wall's base. A moment later, the deserted hangars erupted flame and boiling smoke, hurtling into the starry Jovian sky the slim black fighter manned once again by Eldon Kurland, outlaw. Gaping, they watched it vanish among the paling stars of dawn.

II

HEYWOOD, GION'S JACKAL, moped sullenly about the rocks of the jagged little asteroid, scowling through his vitrine helmet at the tiny figure moving slowly along the crater floor near the distant bones of the wrecked *Plutonian*. The intolerable glare of the naked sun, hidden by the rock's toothed horizon, yet thrust flaming whorls of gold and scarlet above the mountains to hideously outline the ragged ribs of the vessel he had diverted from its course to its death on this uncharted worldlet.

A scowl he kept hidden from his companion darkened his handsome, waxen face, and for the hundredth time he muttered imprecations upon his ill-fortune in the moment of triumph. He had not counted on the girl.

Allen Heywood depended on nothing save himself, for which his master Gion valued him more highly than any other tool and trusted him not at all. Surreptitiously relaying to the Marward the coordinates of the space-ship on which he had slipped as passenger, Heywood had coldly blown out the stern-tubes with a delayed-action bomb and sent the big ship crashing into the selected uncharted asteroid, thinking nothing of the fifty lives that flared out in the exploding wreckage. More careful of his own, he had simply stepped out an emergency lock in a space-suit a moment before the ship struck, al-

lowing himself to slowly drift with his own momentum and the asteroid's faint gravitational pull. He had landed a mile from the ship perhaps an hour after it crashed, only to find himself confronted by another suited figure, the woman Francinet.

Shaken by the encounter, he realized she had no suspicion of the part he had played, or that the crash had been less than accidental. She had herself been saved by the merest freak, having been clad in a space-suit for a photograph-minded acquaintance. When the ship split, she had been shot upward through a rent in the hull, drifting slowly down as had he. They were hopelessly marooned.

The ship was ruined, if not completely destroyed. Heywood pushed aside the horrible steel-hard blobs of red which had been human beings with no apparent qualms, nor troubled himself that it had been he who had slain them all as surely as with gun or knife. With the bows crushed shapeless by the headlong smash into the asteroid and the stern blown wide by its own thermoblast bombs, nothing was left them but a length or two of warped and twisted main cabin hardly capable of retaining the Earth atmosphere still flowing through the tiny purifier engines he had seen to preserving. Cleaning out the unrecognizable dead, he rigged up a rough shelter for them. They had occupied it by now for over a week.

He kicked again at a rock, watching it spiral slowly up and over a crevasse in slow-motion. The jewels were still intact, hidden in the ship's safe. He had not risked her discovering him tampering with either, nor the safer course of destroying her as he had her companions. There was no assurance that another ship than Gion's rescuing craft might not discover them first.

That Gion would send a ship for him he believed with implicit faith, tempered by the knowledge that it would be the loot and not the thief that the powerful Marward coveted. He had no illusions concerning Gion, and so had survived. Thus, as he glanced skyward to see a tiny star moving perceptibly across the blazing night of interspatial glory, Allen Heywood flattened himself behind a huge rock quite as promptly as from the devil himself.

A blaster slid into his hand. The green eyes were intent.

The little ship was coming down.

THE long blue glare paled across the unwinking stars and a red column of fire poured viciously from Kurland's ship, whitening to a rigid arc lancing into the broken rocks below. Eyes intent, the outlaw bent forward over his keys, searching the ragged terrain as he braked his easy dive. Then his firm lips thinned, cruelly hard in the thick beard masking his copper face. The broken ribs of the lost space-ship thrust up against the sun, half-hidden in the shadows of a stoney ledge.

Kurland shut off his drive, thrusting in breakers and snapping down his forward beams. The eight-man ship he had made known and feared through all the distant Jovian system drifted easily through the empty sky, feeling its way on walking tractor beams. The star-shine glinted on the black lines and heavy armament, hesitating to further lighten the dark menace of the craft.

A green beam lanced into a nearby crag, splitting it from top to bottom, and toppling it in soundless ruin across the crater floor. Nothing stirred about the silent wreck.

Lightly the ship touched the crater floor, rocking gently on its beams. A broad figure in black swung down and moved swiftly across the rock toward the broken hulk of the *Plutonian*. Heywood softly drifted into the shadows, floating easily from hollow to hollow, following.

Kurland stood silent, looking up at the gigantic ruin, majestic even in its awful desolation, and the look upon his face was not good to see. There were no deeper hells than those for wreckers, no fate too grim for one who callously snapped the bright, thin thread of life reaching out from Earth to all the Solar planets and their hundred circling satellites. The Marward of Jupiter would buy an empire with this tangled pile of riven steel. He should find the bargain dear.

There was no need to seek airlocks in the *Plutonian's* side. Three were visible, ripped and gaping, and there were a score of torn holes twenty feet and more in width broken through the shell where the vessel had plowed her way into the rocks. Clothes

instruments, furniture, books, and a hundred intimate possessions lay crumpled to view in the gutted cabins or scattered wide across the shining plain. For a moment Kurland looked at a headless doll, then moved forward, his face a deadly mask.

Swiftly he climbed, mounting the broken stone and twisted metal that led him to a greater gash leading into an inner saloon. He forced his way through the debris, then straightened, looking about him curiously.

Furniture and drapes lay crushed, torn, heaped against the broken forward bulkheads, but nowhere could he see the dead who must have died here by the tens and by the score. There was no blood upon the walls, for blood exposed to the instant void of interstellar space crystallized in the very bodies of the injured, but in the debris at the foot of the muralled bulkhead many tiny marbles of dreadful scarlet rolled and tinkled silently as he searched.

He moved forward, passing through the shattered bulkheads where open swinging doors gave acute evidence of the unexpectedness of the catastrophe which had overwhelmed the ship. Ruin and destruction were everywhere, but nowhere a trace of the bodies he knew had exploded into scarlet dust as the biting death of space lanced its deadly vacuum into the rending vessel. There could be only one answer, and it brought his gun into his hand as he moved warily through the corridors.

His search ended in the open, metal-sprayed bowl which had been the forward pilot cabin, for here, piled hideously in red tangles, the rigid blots whose lifeblood had rolled beneath his feet in bright pellets as he walked lay sprawled in horrible disfigurement. There were no longer anything at all. Simply *color*, encompassed in torn and broken clothing.

Whiter than the fleshless bone displayed before him, Kurland thrust to the swinging door, welding it shut in one impulsive burst of his blaster. No man should see what lay beyond. Shaking with a terrible anger, Kurland strode furiously back the broken ship, gun in hand, and flung his curses on ahead. He opened nothing, but shot doors and panels from their hinges as he advanced, eyes glaring for the faintest sign of movement. Only the man who

had planned and executed this horror could have survived it.

MIDWAY in his stride the outlaw halted, gun lifted. The pilot light over the central chambers glowed softly. There was atmosphere within. Kurland snarled, closed his gloved hand on the twisted lever. He jerked and the battered door swung open, revealing a rough air-lock improvised from the usual intercommunicating chamber. He darted in, snapping the door behind him. Air sighed into the chamber as he drew another rude lever down from the box nailed to the bulkhead.

Removing his vitrine helmet, Kurland holstered his gun and thrust open the inner lock. The air was clean and fresh, Earth-crisp. The room was battered, but not structurally damaged, and the furnishings were neatly in place. There were signs that other chambers had been looted to furnish this one, and Kurland smiled mirthlessly. He silently moved across the thick blue rug.

The room beyond was a sleeping cabin, with male attire in the slotted racks. The stamp of occupancy lay everywhere in the worn, neat articles stamped with a golden H. The other room of the suite had been fitted with heat tubes for warmth and cooking, and were piled high with salvaged foodstuffs.

Continuing, Kurland found a broken passage beyond this kitchen, leading deeper into the shop's waist, but cut off from the first suite by locked doors. The outlaw grinned wickedly and, reversing the charge silently burned the doors from their slides. There was no sound, no vibration as he laid them against the wall. Gion had not hunted him for nothing.

The room beyond was deep in rugs, the panelled walls well-hung with costly paintings. A recorder was singing beyond a brocaded drape, and Kurland could hear footsteps moving lightly across the padded floor. With one swift bound he was across the anteroom, ripping the drapery from its flimsy hangings, and stood upon the threshold of the inner room, a black, terrible figure looming in the warped doorway like the angel of Death. His voice rang softly through the sudden frozen silence as he faced the survivor.

"My apologies. I underestimated Gion."

Irene Francinet, whirling in anger at an intrusion she attributed to the hitherto circumspect Heywood, froze at the sight confronting her, a huge black-bearded stranger with the bronze face of a Japanese devil-mask. The gloved hands were gargoyle claws, hovering over the blasters slung at the intruder's steel-black hips, the blazing eyes lances piercing her to the heart. This was Death.

She had been preparing for a sun-bath under a lamp built into the wall over the bed. The hand clutching her garments across her breast sank for a moment, evoking a mirthless grin from the giant that froze her already icy blood.

"You needn't trouble," he said, his voice so low she barely heard him. "It won't work."

She drew herself up, dark head high, and tried to still the tremor of her knees. There was good blood in Irene Francinet, and long years of iron discipline.

"You are intruding," she said, and her voice was steadier than she hoped. "Who are you? Where is your ship?"

His courtesy was insulting as he bowed, his eyes never leaving hers. "Your pardon. I am Eldon Kurland, late of North Jupiter. You need no name."

"I am Irene Francinet, Recorder, of Earth." Her voice was angry, uneven. "I do not understand you."

"Let it suffice that I understand you," he replied, his tone acid with ruthless disdain. He moved slowly forward, his eyes chill diamonds under the softly glowing atomics, and slowly she retreated, no longer able to conceal her fear. His hands never left the black handles of his guns.

"I knew the Marward's arm is long," he went on, grimly. "None better than I. I had not thought it long enough to drag the proud name of Recorder in this bloody mud."

She halted, stamping her foot on the rug. "What is this talk? Marward of where? Why do you fling him in my face like . . . like refuse?" Bright color stained her pale cheeks, and he eyed her curiously.

"You do that well enough, Francinet." He surveyed her from head to toe, savoring the midnight hair, the eyes flaming bluely into his, the straight nose and the strong red mouth. "Disclaim Gion of Jupiter if you will. He's no friend of mine.

But save your anger for better men. I've seen your work."

Her face was blank, and he answered her brutally.

"I stand within it. It stinks in the sun. I walked in blood to fling it in your face, you treacherous snake! I'll see the color of Gion's, yes, and yours, before either of you hears the last of this!" he blazed in a sudden whirl of recurring anger. "You'll play at words with me! You know this ship's cargo! You sent Gion her position even as you blew her tubes and sent her crashing here with all her helpless people." He flung a hand back at the door by which he had entered. "Walk out there, Recorder, and feel their blood roll beneath your feet! You who are so free with other's lives to win the treacherous praise Gion lulls you fools asleep with while he robs and slays!"

"What are you saying?" she whispered, lips stiff in her blanched face. "You think I wrecked the *Plutonian*? You think I killed those people?"

"You live," was his brutal rejoinder.

"But why? *Why*?" she wailed, abandoning her firm dignity as he loomed over her, black with anger. "Why should I do so horrible a thing? What reason could I have?"

"My reason," he snarled. "Because you must, as I came here because I must. I to save my comrades from the noose, you for Gion's gold. Well, you've earned it, and triply over, woman. Where are the jewels?"

"I have no jewels," she faltered, her hand indicating her few personal belongings salvaged from the wreckage of her cabin. He brushed them aside, turned a jeering grin on her.

"You haven't opened the safe, then? By Throaze, but Gion knows his tools! Where is it?"

SHE stared at him. "Back there. In the purser's office, I suppose." Her voice was frankly trembling. "I haven't touched it."

"Clever. I might not have been the first." He jerked his head aft. "Ahead of me. March."

"I'm not . . . dressed."

He tossed her a blanket. "Use that. Show me that safe, Recorder." Her proud

title, in his bitter lips, was an epithet, and she bristled. But she obeyed.

She moved into the dimly lit corridor beyond her little suite, feeling her way along the warped and battered passage. They had not attempted to utilize this part of the vessel, although it lay within their atmospheric seals, and she had rough going. Kurland moved close behind her, hand on his gun, but she made no move to oppose him. Her one hope of safety lay in acceding to this madman's demands, trusting to her erstwhile companion, Heywood. He must be somewhere about. And Kurland did not seem to know of his existence.

The office was a broken shambles, records and papers heaped against the forward bulkhead. The massive safes had been torn bodily from the wall and lay upended in the litter. Kurland strode swiftly to the smallest, motioning her to immobility with his gun. Supplied with Gion by the proper combinations, he spun the six dials expertly and the three doors fell open. He took out a small leaden box, then four more.

Prismatic fire blazed roof-high as he flung back the cover of one, jetting irridescently from a tumbled mass of primitive goldwork encrusted with the unbelievable gems of Orion. He lifted a heavy golden torque, studded with blazing goutts of crimson flame and slung on an inch-thick rope of giant Venusian pearls worth each the lives of twenty men. A yellow diamond Chalcidite rolled across the scarred steel of the open door and came to rest, winking like an evil eye in the dim light sifting down the corridor behind Kurland.

His voice was soft, terrible in its hatred as he looked at her, blanket clutched frozen across her bosom. His eyes blazed as balefully as the huge jewel winking before him.

"Will you lie now, Recorder? These are the Jewels of Orion!"

She did not answer, less for the contemptuous accusation in his voice than the more dreadful thought her trained mind thrust at her as insistently. If the *Plutonian* had been sabotaged and wrecked for such world-loot, as his sure knowledge, his very presence indicated, then his first assumption must inevitably be true. The survivor he considered her must indeed be

the hellish wrecker. And she was not the only survivor.

Her eyes were enormous. A mound of living fire grew upon the dusty steel as he piled up the blazing rings and brooches of the long-dead Orion kings. He tossed down a circlet of hammered gold, wreathed for the brows of some ancient queen, and the thirty pendant gems tinkled musically in the silence. Each could have brought the souls of an army, round, glinting stars of purest emerald green deep-sunk with tiny suns of icy diamond lustre. Kurland paused in his magical task, looking across at her.

"Are they worth the blood we walked upon to reach them, Recorder?" he asked, quietly.

"I . . . I didn't know," she faltered, meeting his gaze with growing firmness.

"Men have died before over these bright toys," he shrugged, opening another box and pouring it in a blazing cascade over the first heap of white fire. "Men will die again. And among them, Gion."

"The Marward of Jupiter?" she whispered. "He knows? He sent you here, knowing this?"

"Your message reached him. The Marward is swift to serve his servants. Particularly those . . . bearing gifts."

"You betray yourself," she flashed, pointing at the gems. "Gion is evil, but would he trust any messenger with *those*?"

Kurland looked quietly at her. "The Marward holds me in tighter bonds than you think, Recorder. If I fail him, five of my friends hang. Skyhigh."

She looked searchingly at him. "Who are you? You rate your friends very high, Black-beard."

KURLAND smiled, a hard grin with no mirth in it. "I am Eldon Kurland, as I told you. Outlaw. Gion made. Were you a true Recorder, you should know of me, and know I hold my men dearer than this trumpery glass from beyond the Milky Way." His gloved hand struck the gems contemptuously, tossing jewels to right and left upon the papered flooring. She followed their meteoric flight, then glanced up in astonishment as Kurland swayed, knees buckling, and sank with a clash of heavy armor to sprawl across the fortune he had struck aside. Behind him a bright, feral

countenance smiled wolfishly and the slight figure which had slipped silently into the room from the passage straightened up triumphantly, gun in hand. Allen Heywood smiled upon her benignly.

III

KURLAND OPENED HIS EYES dizzily, then shut them again. The thick voice of Gion purred through the spinning darkness.

"You might as well, Kurland. It's real."

He opened them again, fixing his unsteady regard upon the heavy, impassive countenance of the Jovian Marward. Gion sat across the table, his hands folded upon the polished surface. The leaden boxes were stacked neatly beside his arm. A thinly wavering smile touched Kurland's lips as he glanced back at Gion.

"Your arm is longer than I thought, Gion."

"You had your warning," shrugged the Marward.

"How did she do it?"

Gion smiled, a gross caricature of mirth. "It would be amusing to let you go in that misapprehension, I suppose. Perhaps profitable. But you've earned the right to know. The girl wasn't my agent. So much the worse for her. While you were reviling her, the man who wrecked the *Plutonian* walked up behind you. Heywood isn't one to take chances, as your head probably indicates."

"Heywood?"

Gion waved a casual hand at a slight, elegant figure seated at his right, and the evil little jackal permitted himself a tight-lipped grin at Kurland, the chained lion. The outlaw studied him without affection.

"And what do you have on him?"

"Nothing in particular," shrugged Gion.

"Heywood is devoted to my interests, seeing they're his own. I have no more loyal follower, no better friend."

Allen Heywood fidgeted under the unusual expansiveness of his patron, allowing a tinge of color to stain his cold pallor. The look he gave the Marward was an amazing blend of adulation and open suspicion, and Kurland smiled thinly. He did not anticipate leaving this little rocky underground room alive, and had no objection to sowing dissension as a parting leg-

acy. His dark eyes sought the Marward's.

"Our gentlemen's agreement, I take it, is off?"

Gion nodded indifferently. "But naturally. It was not you who fetched me the Orion jewels, Kurland. Your intentions may have been honorable, and in all honesty I admit so much, but it was Allen Heywood who brought me the stones. The reward I meant for you shall be his."

Kurland glanced at Heywood with some pleasure. The little man might not care for that.

The burly Marward rose, pulling his gun. The outlaw noted that the alert Heywood was on his feet as promptly, his own gun opening in his hand. But Gion meditated nothing at the moment, apparently, save ridding himself of evidence even one of his eminence could not brook revealing. He motioned Kurland to rise.

The outlaw got up, noting his feet were hobbled by a short rope. His wrists were lashed behind his back, his holster empty. From the aching dizziness in his limbs and head he realized that Heywood must have drugged him after striking him down back upon the asteroid where the *Plutonian* had crashed, taking no chances whatsoever on the long voyage back to Jupiter in Kurland's ship, bearing captive and loot. The feral little man slipped behind him, prodding him with his blaster.

"Move, wolf's-head." He shuffled silently after Gion, moving ahead down rocky, dim-lit corridors. There was no sound but the rasp of their boots and the growing rumble of underground water not far ahead.

THE massive stronghold of Montalven where Gion squatted, playing at power behind the scenes, was far more fortress than palace, relic of an earlier day when Earthmen maintained their sway by the strength of their ships and spreading armies rather than by the gentler rule of law. The taste of power was sweeter in the Marward's mouth than the empty display indulged in by the appointed viceroys whose strength he had sapped by gold and treachery, rudely expanding beyond the borders of the northern province legitimately his own until all the Earth colonies and many of the native kingdoms trembled at his slightest word. Kurland

was being afforded a further glimpse of the reason. He had been outlawed and hunted across Jupiter for his defiance of that lawless sway. He was to die for it now.

They came out upon a rough stone platform where a swift underground river glanced roughly by in rude channels, spitting foam and spray as it dashed against the stone. A flimsily built raft made from an old door and several planks tied together with rope was moored at the quay's edge, a foot or so below the floor level, and lying bound upon it, gagged, lay the girl Kurland had found in the wreckage of the *Plutonian*, Irene Francinet. Her white dress was already soaked as the wretched craft bobbed and swayed in the swift current.

Kurland halted, swung angrily on Gion. "What is this, Marward? You disclaimed the woman."

"So I did," placidly agreed Gion. "I told you Allen was thorough. He brought back *everything*."

"And . . . we know too much?"

"Too much to hang," replied Gion, frankly. "Not with your friends. You're going down the river. It doesn't come out."

"She's a woman, Gion. What's her word against yours?"

"She's a Recorder, a trained Government official of the highest rank. Their word against kings and princes, my friend. I don't take chances, my friend. Step down. Allen, see that he does."

Under the sudden pressure of Heywood's weapon, there was nothing for Kurland to do but obey. He stepped down upon the raft, tipping it dangerously and soaking the Francinet woman to the hips. He squatted down, obediently.

Gion nodded. "Tie him to those hinges, Allen. They'll drift for miles before the roof slopes down and sinks the raft." There was a sudden gleam in his bulging eyes as the lighter man swung down upon the raft, but Kurland said nothing. He owed the wrecker-vulture nothing.

Roped to the worn hinges, he sat quietly watching the bulky Jovian ruler and his dapper lackey. Gion smiled.

"Tight enough, Allen. Get back and cast them off." And he gave Heywood his hand to assist him. Dazzled by the

condescension of his noble confederate, Heywood failed to notice that it was the left hand of the Marward he grasped. The powerful muscles contracted to heave him to safety on the rough-hewn quay, and, as he came, the right arm of the Marward swung abruptly to drive a heavy dagger to the hilt in the startled little fiend's unprotected throat. Allen Heywood had for once neglected his caution.

Contemptuously, Gion released the suddenly slack fingers of his devoted henchman, the dying man falling heavily back upon the raft, choking in his bubbling blood. He rolled to one side, staining Irene's white dress a horrid crimson as he clutched her body, his eyes a glaring horror as he stared at the faintly smiling Marward watching him, then fell back limply. His head dropped, his clawed hands relaxed, and he sagged into the water. A booted leg, caught between two broken planks, held him precariously, half-submerged. The green waters rushing past darkened thinly as he fled along the death-trail upon which he had been so cheerfully embarking Kurland and the hapless Irene Francinet.

Kurland looked up stonily at the Marward.

"It doesn't pay to work for you, does it, Gion?" he asked, quietly.

"I promised him your reward," Gion smiled, bending to cut the rope holding the raft. "You may share it with him. Bon voyage, my friends."

The rope parted, the flimsy contraption darting away into the current. Their last view of the Marward was of a jocular farewell waved after them as they dashed wildly into the round tunnel below the cavern where the landing crouched. Shadows engulfed them as the raft swayed drunkenly through the sibilant darkness.

IV

EVEN as Gion vanished, Kurland exploded into action. His shoulders knotted and he exerted every available ounce of strength in a ferocious test of his wrist lashings. But their dead passenger had been an expert. They held fast. Writhing over on his side, he doubled himself and his body tensed, steel-hard

muscle and powerful bones and sinew against the Marward's treacherous bonds. For long moments, as they whirled and swayed deeper into the darkening tunnel beneath the rocky hills of Jupiter, he pulled and strained evenly at his leg ropes.

HERE, too, Heywood had done with professional skill his bravo's work, but he had lavished no such care on the makeshift raft designed for the last journey he had not thought to take himself. The rough board holding Kurland's boots bent upward, cracked, bent double, and split lengthwise. He jerked his legs free.

Hooking his boots under a second plank, he slid his bare feet from the sleek black leather. Twisting about, he clamped a body-scissors on the gasping Irene Francinet. His powerful back muscles doubled, coiled upon themselves, lifting her inert figure from the dark water running over the partially submerged planks where she lay bound. They creaked, straining, as he exerted a pitiless pressure on her bowed ribs and chest. The steady leverage of her body slowly twisted loose the outer planks of the raft, and split two of them cleanly from the rough framework.

Gasping, he let her fall, then swung her again in her loosening bonds, letting her drop down against his own chest.

"Quickly," he snapped. Your hands to my wrists! Before the ropes swell."

She pressed herself against him, wet and cold in the gathering darkness, fumbling with the ropes still holding him fast which had given him the tremendous leverage to break her own bonds. It was a struggle between her slim fingers and the expanding Jovian fibers of the cords, but he had been in time. She undid the knots and a moment later he had torn his hands free and sat up. With one swift move he slipped her gag off and ripped at her remaining bonds. Board after board tore free and shot off into the darkness, and when he had unfastened the last of the thin ropes holding her, stuffing them under his gun belt, there was little of the raft Heywood had thrown together but the big door they crouched on and a tangle of crazily-angled planks astern where the dead jackal's booted leg still thrust up stiffly from the swirling waters.

"Here!" Kurland bit at her, thrusting

a broken shaft of wood into her chilled, numb fingers. "Paddle, girl, if you want to see the Sun again!" And he dug in on his side with another fragment of the plank he had broken.

Irene bowed, exerting what strength her long, drug-induced sleep from the planetoid and consequent imprisonment had left, trying her best to keep up with Kurland's long, plunging strokes. The raft's wild career into the depths of the Montral mountains was checked, then halted. They watched the distant circle of light marking the tunnel entrance, hoping against hope that its faint glimmer of phosphorescent light might not fade and dwindle once more. For a moment the raft held, then slowly inched backward against the current, lurching perilously through the dashing tunnels of the underground river.

Kurland glanced swiftly about. An element of his success both as peaceful racketeer and hunted outlaw had been his ability to subordinate his naturally sanguine temperament to the circumstances of the moment. He realized the awkward craft must collapse long before it was forced upstream to the quay from whence it had been launched. And should it hold, it was only too evident the paddlers could not. He tossed aside his board and stood up, drawing her up beside him.

"You can swim?" he asked. It was more a statement than a question, for the proud corps of Recorders were the pick of the Solar System's trained agents.

"Yes," she replied. "Can we make it?" He tossed her the end of the thin rope he pulled from beneath his belt. "Knot that on your wrist, Recorder. We've travelled so many miles together, I'd not be parted on this last one."

She bowknotted the line, then poised, shivering and soaked, drenched with the brackish river water, stained with Heywood's blood. He looked at her, seeing in the dusk the slim, beautiful lines of her body under the torn white robe. She flung him a glance, impatient, tense.

"Ready, Kurland. We're drifting."

"Ride the eddies," he warned, his arm tightening for an instant about her half-bare shoulders. "We'll hug the wall." He bent for a moment, seizing the dead man's boot and plunging his arm beneath the surface. In his hand when he arose was

the jackal's blue-black glare-pistol. Holstering it, he pressed her hand, swung forward, and launched himself flatly into the stream, her white body streaking at his side. They emerged near the rocky wall where the swirling riffles were white in the shadowy dusk and the ragged teeth of the overhead rocks bit wickedly down at them as they swam. The raft turned about two or three times, then sped silently downstream into the bowels of the planet, bearing the dead Heywood to the unknown tomb he had meant for them.

THEREAFTER, it became a nightmare neither could ever quite remember nor forget. Rocks battered them. Shallow water, giving a moment's respite from effort, made the struggle upstream seem the harder. Foam and spray blinded them. Eddies spun them crazily in the dark. Narrow sluices tore at them forcing them relentlessly back into the depths. Only the rope connecting their arms saved both on more than one occasion, and within yards of the entrance it parted. Kurland's powerful arm closed about Irene, the renewed light from the nearing tunnel-mouth bright on her upturned face. He grinned down at her from the tangled black hair framing his shadowed face.

"Stick it, Recorder," he whispered, and felt her go limp in his arm. The title was no longer a biting imprecation. She took a breath, flung back her own tangled curls, and leaned forward into the current once more. He could not see her face. Heads down, they bent stiff arms, threshed leaden thighs, and fought again the grim river boiling into the tunnel. The open cave was full in view.

Less than an hour after they had been flung to death from its worn stones, they lay gasping on the rude quay, their hands dug into the rocky surface as though to anchor themselves forever to the solidity it represented. There were no signs of Gion or any of his men.

Kurland stirred, sat up. Irene just looked at him, not troubling to lift her head from the quay. He pulled off his torn jacket, his massive chest and powerful arms strangely white in the brilliant atomic overhead. The tangled black beard dripped upon the floor, the faint drops loud in the silence. He shook himself,

getting to his feet, a wild, ragged, outlandish figure. The heavy gun swinging low on his hip gleamed blackly.

She sat up, the water running from the rags of her once-dainty gown. She ran her hands through her black hair, watching him. His face was flinty, shadowed in the brilliance.

"What now, Kurland?"

His hand stroked the gleaming butt of his gun. He looked at her, unseeing.

"Gion."

"No." Her voice was oddly flat, accented.

"We made a good bargain, Gion and I," he replied, his eyes accepting her. "The jewels for my men's lives. Now, I collect."

She came to her feet, lithe and graceful even in her ragged tatters. "Not with guns, Kurland! I can free your men. I can ruin Gion, smash his rotten empire. I'm a Recorder. My word could break him in any court from here to Pluto. The law can handle him."

"Our law is here," replied Kurland, gravely. His hand patted the black leather holster sheathing Heywood's gun.

"Outlaw guns!" she flared. "Is that your justice, here on Jupiter?"

"You have tasted Gion's!" he grimly reminded her. "Courts! Laws! And who will serve the Marward with the warrant, girl? He feeds a thousand men within this single fortress city. He rules the rest through fear."

She looked up the passage where the Marward had vanished and there was a strange and haunting look upon her lovely face.

"It will not hold them now," she said, her voice unsteady. "Gion is dead."

His face blanked. She nodded.

"Your reason?" His eyes bored into hers. Only the sibilant gurgle of the river glancing past disturbed the quiet of the ancient dungeon.

"Why did Gion send across the System to wreck the *Plutonian*?" she replied. "Perhaps to avert suspicion, yes. But I can tell you why. He had to, because the *Plutonian* would never come to Jupiter. Because the Jewels of Orion were slipping beyond his grasp forever."

"You mean" Kurland began, slowly.

"They did not dare. They were exhibited on all the inner worlds, but not on Saturn, nor on Jupiter. They're unstable, crystallized gas from a galaxy a million miles beyond the belt of Orion.

"We handled them," he urged.

"In Terran atmosphere, yes. The Council dare not risk them free in anything less. Let the Cranford elements touch those jewels" Her shrug was expressive.

"The jewel boxes were upon his desk when I awoke," he rejoined, tugging thoughtfully at his beard.

"He had not opened them," she replied, positively. "They were his bait, to dull his jackal Heywood's wits, to speed him into carelessness. You saw his impatience to be done, to divide the spoil. He was in haste for his reward."

"Gion did not keep him waiting," replied Kurland, a grim laugh in the words. "I did not know of this."

"It is known to few, Recorders among them. I tell you that you may leave the Marward to his fate.

KURLAND shook his head. "But not my men. His remain, and mine are outlaws by his decree. I cannot abandon them."

"I revoke your outlawry, and your men's." Her mien was imperious, and he did not demur.

"You have the power?" he asked, quietly.

"He had no authority to sentence. Authority or none, my word outweighs his, my will his law." She watched him steadily, and he smiled back, a glow about his heart at the fine, proud spirit of this woman fighting hard against his rocky will.

He took her arm. "You have a theory. Let us test it, on Gion." They moved softly into the rough-cut corridor. The lights were very old and dim with ancient grime, but the way was plain enough. Kurland grinned at her. "They did not plan on our returning."

"They did not plan on many things," she whispered, her voice suddenly venomous. "I remember nothing after Heywood stunned you, there in the *Plutonian*, until he tied me to the raft just before you came. He was kind enough to inform me that I was on Jupiter, under Gion's

fortress, and could expect to die there. When he spoke of the reward he had earned by his treachery, I realized what Gion had become and how justly he might be punished."

While she whispered, they had swiftly stolen along the stone tunnels cut long ago by the Jovians for the first wild troops of Earth. Kurland unerringly led the way, following the dusty trail of footsteps he himself had earlier trodden under the guns of the Marward and his agent. Suddenly he paused, feeling a rough projection under his palm still warm. He pushed, and a clumsy panel gave, swinging in to reveal a deep, shadowy pit sinking far down into the depths of the rocks, extending upward until it was lost in the darkness. He thrust in his head. Above him the twinkling stars glimmered down through the opening of the rough volcanic blow-hole, or vent. Directly opposite the panel, a plank leading to its open port, his own black fighter sat poised nose-up, and locked in shining modern cradles below were three lesser craft, dark and wearing no colors.

"Heywood came last, drifting in on gravity beams," he whispered, moving aside that she might see. "No one saw him arrive . . . nor his cargo."

"What ships are those?" she asked, peering down.

"Gion's. Escape craft. The regular cradles on the open field could go, but he keeps ships here in this forgotten blow-hole, unmarked and unknown. Insurance. Trust a rat to have a way to leave the sinking ship. We'll remember them." He closed the door gently.

They slipped on. Above them the distant sounds of fortress life drifted through the deserted corridors, but in these depths they met no living thing. His hand checked her, hard on her soft arm.

"Beyond that. The room where Gion sat, watching me." His gun was out, the powerful slides poised and ready in his hand. "Wait here."

"I needn't," she replied, quietly. "You will not find him, Kurland."

He rounded the corner, paused. The rough wooden door of the room stood half ajar. A dim light burned above it, casting dark and mocking shadows across the worn grey stone. Somewhere a man

whistled merrily, faded away into the distance.

They moved forward, silent, barefoot on the stone. He sighted on the door's edge, stepped forward abruptly. She saw him freeze, the gun lifting, then sway back, his body slowly relaxing. The blaster was hip-high, level, ruthless as the steel within his greying eyes. The door swung silently open at his touch.

Gion sat beyond the table, the leaden boxes piled beside him. One lay open, tilted carelessly upon its side, and across the gleaming surface of the table lay a tumbled heap of ruddy golden chains and bangles and massive, chiseled collars. Bright glints of white and blue and green sparkled cleanly through the twisted coils of hammered gold, but the white-hot glare the outlaw knew no longer blazed within the priceless settings.

The Jewels of Orion were . . . gone.

KURLAND and the girl moved forward, their eyes on Gion, sitting in silence, his hands buried wrist-deep within the tumbled fortune spilling from the leaden box. He made no move, nor spoke.

They paused, standing by the table's edge, a golden heap of ancient rings winking clean white sparks through their coils. A look of infinite wonder darkened Kurland's face as he studied Gion's.

"He has escaped us," the outlaw said. "And so easily. He never knew."

The woman nodded. "They said of him, like Midas, that he had the golden touch, that everything on which he laid his hand was his. He made it so, and came to this. A fatal gift, Kurland."

The Marward's garments stirred to a vagrant draft, shifting in a silver ripple across his massive chest. But a chest of human flesh no longer. The Orion jewels had gone, dissolved into air like dreams, and before the silent Marward lay the empty settings, flaunting their remaining simpler jewels in barren poverty, but the loss no longer troubled Gion. Beneath his simple robe his flesh shone with a thousand lustrous lights, his muscles ridged with Phidian carving in purest emerald green. His deep-sunk eyes were topaz gold, shot through with jetting bits of white, and his startled lips were purple

as fire-shot jade. His massive head was translucent through and through, a vein-sprayed sculpture in Venetian glass where truant silver bubbles froze in silent thunder as they burst. His hands were coral white, the bones within curling to and fro like vagrant bits of scarlet ruby, all caught and held forever in one eternal crash of living color. The Jewels of Orion had but changed their form, burst from the ancient golden settings to plunge and explode and freeze anew in living human flesh.

Gion, Marward of Jupiter, had become himself a jewel.

Slowly Kurland sheathed his blaster.

"Our work is done, Irene. And by the Marward himself."

She looked up at him, pale-faced, dark-eyed, watchful. "I could have told him as much." Her eyes fell to the table, to the four boxes remaining unopened, then rose to his. "Must I tell you?"

He slowly picked up the boxes, weighing their priceless, deadly contents.

"My crew is caged back there in those side corridors, near those ships. We'll take them and go. There's nothing to hold us . . . now." His hand touched her shoulder. "You will come with us?"

She smiled, and gestured toward the boxes that held the Jewels of Orion.

There was a pause, and his face slowly paled. But his eyes never left her. He nodded slowly, then extended the boxes to her. "A Marward couldn't hold them, and I've been an outlaw too long."

But her hands gently repulsed his offer. There was color again in her damp cheeks, a rushing glowing tide of color that warmed her cold body like wine.

"We'll deliver them to the authorities. But, until then—hold them for me, Kurland."

His eyes glittered as he laid the leaden boxes suddenly on the table and his hands were rough upon her shoulders.

"So you make an honest pirate out of me, Irene? You give me name and ship again, you trust me as you would trust any decent sailorman? Then take the consequences!" And his lips were hard and fierce on hers, his arms crushed tight about her ragged body. She stiffened, then slowly relaxed, her eyes laughing into his.

"Did I pardon you for less?"



They had to kill it, finally.

The Burnt Planet

By WILLIAM BRITTAIN

Mad with despair, they fought back from the ruins. Whoever these invaders were, they should not have a world which its defenders themselves had destroyed!

THE LAND WAS DARK IN THE softly falling rain, and the smell of green things was in the air. The crew huddled in their cloaks and peered into the approaching dusk as they unloaded

the great silver space ship. They were apprehensive of the stark ruins that began barely a mile from the ship, the ruins that seemed to sprawl interminably across the flat land beside the broad river.

In the metal headquarters hut, the commander glanced nervously at his chronometer. The astrogator looked up from his interminable reckonings and smiled.

"Don't worry, captain," he said. "They'll be all right. After all, we haven't seen any life but a few small animals. And they ran from us."

The commander nodded absently, but went to the open door and stared out into the rain. It made a musical tinkling on the thin metallic dome of the hut.

"I know," he said. "Perhaps that's why I'm worried. It's the feeling of death here, as though it might spring at us from some corner in those ruins . . . I should have sent out a stronger scout party."

The astrogator shrugged and returned to his log. "If anything had gone wrong, they would have messaged us."

THE commander smiled an unwilling agreement, but he stayed in the open door, searching the gathering darkness toward the city. He could not shake loose from the feeling of doom that had settled on him as soon as they had made their landfall and clambered from the airlocks of the spaceship. This was a strange world, the commander thought to himself. It seemed to have everything—everything but intelligent inhabitants. They had circled it for two days before they had chosen this wide green valley for their landfall. They had seen cities, many of them, great cities along seacoasts and in rich plains, cities in mountains and in valleys, but nowhere had they seen life.

The first cautious explorations after the landing that morning had shown that there was plenty of good water. The soil seemed rich, and vegetation grew in profusion, even among the ruins they had warily skirted. The atmosphere was perfect . . . it was what they had searched for through the long bitter years . . . this stable atmosphere with its abundance of life-giving oxygen. And minerals aplenty . . . the burned and blasted metal skeletons of the ruined city showed that. The commander told himself that he was a fool for worrying, when he should be shouting with joy at his luck.

There was a shout from the outpost, a laugh, and then his second-in-command

loped through the rain, smiling broadly. Behind him were the others, laughing and joking, shrugging their packs to the ground. Gladness and wonder were in their faces and their voices, and the commander knew that this was the world they had sought for so long.

The lieutenant ducked into the doorway and paused to warm himself at the little thermal unit. He wiped the rain from his face, reached for the wine bottle beside the astrogator's work board, and tilted it.

"This is it, sir," he said. He was young, and Fate had been good to him, and he was exulting in it. "It's everything we ever dared dream about. It will support the whole race, every one of us, I think, if the rest of this world is anything like what we've seen this day."

The commander grinned back at him, relief plain in his face. He was phrasing the message that he would send home across the void, the message they had waited for down through the weary years, the years that had rolled by while the land burned up under a blazing sun, while the water disappeared and the atmosphere became thin . . . But there was still in him the doubt, the remnant of fear . . .

"Did you," he spaced the words carefully, "find any sign of—intelligent life?"

The lieutenant's smile faded. He glanced quickly out at the men, breaking out their rations, resting from the labor, and looked back at his captain. He nodded.

"Tracks," he said. "We came across them leading out of the deserted city."

"Many?"

"I don't think so. Five or six, perhaps. And we found where they had killed one of the small animals and eaten it."

"Did they seem—intelligent? Really, I mean?"

The lieutenant shrugged. "Who knows? They're bipeds, at any rate. We followed the tracks, but they had taken to a small stream bed, and we lost them."

The commander pondered. Then he made his decision.

"In a country as large as this," he said, "five or six can't make any difference to us, not even to a small party like our own. And certainly not when the ships begin arriving from home."

The lieutenant leaned back on his pack, his face content. The commander sat at a

field desk and started writing, carefully, knowing that what he wrote would someday be in every textbook. The message was not difficult, really. Thousands of space captains had phrased the message in their minds down through the years of The Search. So had he, time and again, as he lay in his bunk or watched the wheeling stars from the bridge. In the glow of the thermal unit his stern face glowed with pride and the certainty that it was his ship that had saved a world . . .

In another hut the scholar stared thoughtfully at the thing he had found in the old house where they had discovered the tracks. There had been a language on this dead world, and in his hand he held some of the brown mouldering pages upon which the language had been written. He applied his scholar's mind to the puzzle . . .

THE city crouched grimly about them. Even though they had neither seen nor heard any life in these streets save a few small animals who had fled their coming, they gripped their projectors at the ready.

Almost every structure had been damaged. Many were mere twisted heaps of debris, timbers and girders thrusting insanely at a sky that today was blue and benign. The taller, sturdier buildings still stood, but their walls were cracked and their windows gaping hollow eyes in the blank faces. Rubble clogged the streets, and grass had split the pavements. Here and there among the ruins a sapling stood bravely, its roots grasping in the shattered masonry.

In the streets, rusting and ancient, were objects which they surmised must have been vehicles. In some of them they found fragments of bone and shreds of clothing. They had seen other bones; in doorways, on the ground floors of the few buildings they had penetrated.

"Whatever it was," the second-in-command said, "it struck them swiftly."

"Some sickness, a virus, perhaps?" the astrogator suggested.

The commander shook his head. "War," he said. "Only war could do this to a city."

The lieutenant said admiringly, "Whoever they were, they certainly developed some pretty terrific weapons."

The commander had smiled, and patted his projector. "No more terrific than these," he said. "Our own people developed weapons, too. Thank the stars that we have learned not to use them on each other."

The scholar looked up from the inscription he had found on the side of a building.

"And thank the stars," he said, "that we learned in time. The people of this world apparently did not."

It was then, while they spoke, that from somewhere in the ruins there was a sharp crack, and one of the crew spun around and fell in the street. In the shattered silence of the city the sound echoed crazily.

"Take cover!" the captain shouted, and he plunged into a huge doorway, peering around the protecting portal. There was another crack, and something whined by him.

"Projectile weapon!" whispered the lieutenant behind him. He was prone, sighting his projector at a half-ruined four-story house at the corner. He pressed the control switch, once, and a section of the second floor seemed to explode into hurtling gray dust and shrieking steel.

Other projectors were spitting from doorways and from behind piles of brick and debris in the streets. The captain, watching the building from which the answering fire seemed to come, thought he saw movement behind one of the blank windows. Before he could take aim, there was a ripping series of shots and the masonry of the portal flew into dust. He heard the low flat whine of ricochets, and he withdrew deeper into the dimness of the great entranceway. Up the street he heard a crew member cry out in pain.

"The second floor!" he cried, and a hurricane of electron bolts ripped into the building at the corner. The building seemed to rip apart under the impact and there was the roar of falling bricks and timber as a floor gave way with a crash. They dashed out of cover, crouching, firing as they went.

They found three bodies in the ruins. Bipedes. Pale pasty flesh, faces half-hidden by tangled hair. The bodies were only partially clad in faded tattered clothes, and the feet were encased in what appeared to be the tanned hide of an animal. The flesh and the clothing were filthy, and they stank.

The bodies were huddled around their weapon, a metallic-looking projectile-thrower mounted on three legs. Its barrel was still hot.

A little later they flushed another of the creatures in a narrow street. It howled gibberish at them and fled, but they cornered the thing against a heap of rubble. It mouthed things at them, and hurled bits of brick. Its eyes were wild and staring, and spittle trickled down the face into the sodden filthy rags it wore. They had to kill it, finally.

The commander turned the dead thing over with his projector stock, and stared at it.

"Mad," he said. "There are only a few of them, and they are mad."

The scholar nodded. He had found many of the writings, and they were stuffed in his pack and in his pockets, and he held one while he talked.

"They are mad," he said, "and there cannot be many of them. Certainly not enough to halt the advance of civilization."

It was as if he saw, already, the soaring towers of the cities they would build here over the pitiful ruins, as though the busy highways already spanned this rich new world.

"We have won our bridgehead here," he said. "Soon we will have won the world. The world," he looked down at the carcass at his feet, "that these poor fools threw away."

THE scholar made his greatest find late that afternoon, on the street-level floor of an almost-intact building. It must have been a place where writings had been stored, or perhaps sold. The brown rotting pages were everywhere, and the mouldering covers in which the writings had been bound. The scholar cried out with pleasure, and the commander was forced to delay their return to the ship so that the crew could carry part of the loot with them, for further study.

The scholar was squatting in a corner of the room, poring over one of the ancient records, when he looked up and shouted, "I think I've got it! I think I've got it! I think I've found the key to their language!"

The commander had smiled indulgently,

for though he believed in action, he had respect for the scholar, and knew that the things the scholar might discover in the old writings might help him in his own task as leader of the expedition.

It was then that the creatures attacked for the last time. They must have crept into the building and gathered there in the dimness, waiting their opportunity. There were six of them. They poured through a rear door into the room of writings, howling, their projectile-throwers barking. Their wild ululations were the screams of the demented. The commander could see the madness in their eyes and he knew why he had been afraid.

The astrogator was down before they could return the fire, and then the projectors cracked out their blue-flamed doom.

The lieutenant cursed as he was hit; he dropped to one knee, firing swiftly, and then the creatures were down and it was over. The wild bearded faces were charred and blackened, and in the sudden silence was the crackle of the little blue flames as they danced over the filthy ragged clothing of the dead. The commander let his breath go, at last, in a long gasping sigh.

He started to walk toward the bodies, knowing that they were the last, knowing that if there had been any more they would have waited, gathering strength, and they would not have made the crazy suicidal attack. The fighting was over. The savage creatures, unbalanced by their miserable existence among the ruins of the glory that had been theirs, would never again threaten the bridgehead he had carved on this world. It was his world now.

There was a frantic tugging at his sleeve, and he shook the battle fog from his eyes and grinned at the scholar. The commander remembered that even while the fight had roared hot and sharp, the scholar had not moved from his corner, nor taken his eyes from the pages he was studying. And now the scholar was fairly dancing with excitement.

"I've got it!" he said, almost chortling. "It wasn't hard with the key—and I found the key!"

He gestured toward the little tangle of bodies, silent in the room of writings.

"They called themselves 'Men,'" he said. The commander shrugged.

THE LITTLE MONSTERS COME

By RAY CUMMINGS

Desperately seeking escape from their own tortured chunk of hell, they needed a specimen from this great and gracious world they planned to steal. But swamp-roving, 'gator-fighting Allen Nixon wasn't the type to be cut up alive!

THERE WAS ABSOLUTELY nothing wrong or weird about the Florida Everglades at night. At least, not to Allen Nixon. He sat alone in the stern of a flat-bottomed rowboat paddling calmly, albeit soundlessly, with one small oar. The moon was down and the tall old pines were so many black ribs and tears in the star-studded gown of the sky. The stars themselves dropped their fiery pin-points in the glassy surface of the winding bayou. The tangled banks, where sometimes the cypress branches dipped heavy and sodden into the water, were shadowed blurs so that the bayou was a twisted ribbon between them.

Nothing strange. Nothing unusual. Certainly not to Allen Nixon. Twenty-four years ago he had been born here, only a score or so miles north at the fringes of the great swamp, where a little Seminole village stood beside a bayou just like this. There his white father had loved and married his Indian mother; there he had lived and gone to the Mission School and then, in his 'teens, to the High School up in Jacksonville. Now he and his younger brother Ralph, with their parents dead, were running a small farm their father had left them. It was back at the mouth of the bayou, where the Gulf lapped in the starlight on the sandspits, and the tangled wiregrass was alive at night with the croaking of the marsh-hens. Ralph had not wanted to come out tonight. He was tired, perhaps lazy. He said he would have the four 'gators skinned by the time Allen got back at midnight; and he'd help with whatever others Allen brought in. Perhaps he would, but more likely he wouldn't.

So Allen Nixon, with the moon down, was paddling up into the silent twistings of the bayou alone. He was a tall, lean fellow, lanky like his father, with muscles

hardened by a lifetime of the work of the backwoods. He was bareheaded; his sleek, straight, dead-black hair glistened in the starlight. His grey flannel shirt was open at a muscular throat. He sat erect, with his legs, clad in dark trousers and worn leather puttees, stretched out to the shotgun, knife and hatchet that lay in the bottom of the rowboat. The faint night-breeze fanned his rugged face, bronzed by the hot Florida sun and swarthy with the Seminole heritage.

Now he was rounding a sharp curve in the bayou, and the breeze was more squarely in his face than ever. That was good. No scent of him could blow forward to reach any 'gator that might have surfaced on the starlit stretch ahead. Two was all he hoped for tonight, and then he would head back. Quietly he shipped his oar and adjusted a small electric torch on a band around his forehead. Then with its pencilpoint of light sweeping the bayou ahead of him, again he started paddling. Even more silently, this time, so that there was no drip from the blade as he skillfully raised it, no least murmur of splash as he brought it forward and dipped it again. An alligator, lying quiet with only a tip of nose and eyes at the surface, is more alert, more ready to scurry away than a mouse.

There was in Nixon's mind nothing but intentness to see the two little pin-points of fire in the bayou surface, two among the many that were reflected stars, yet he would see the difference, the spacing, a little greener, more glowing fire which would mark them as the eyes of a drowsing 'gator. He was thinking only that he would get two as soon as he could and get back to Ralph. That would make ten altogether this moon—ten salted skins, enough to be worth a trip to the market in Pensacola,

He wrenched up a tree and swung it.



WHAT he did not know was that in the shadows of the bayou bank up ahead strange little shapes were cautiously moving. Living things that did not belong here; that had never been here before.

The night sounds of the lush woods were blended into a voice which Nixon had heard all his life, so that now he was never aware that he was hearing it. A 'gator would hear it too—the slither of a rattler; the flip of a fish or a water moccasin; a marsh-hen croaking; or an owl's hoot—and the steady blend of the voices of a million million insects. And that was all that could be heard, for the strange dark little shapes, along the bank at the next bend, moved very cautiously, quite soundlessly—little things moving upright. They were only a few inches tall. Once they stood in a group as though communicating. One of them carried a tiny light, but its glow was less than a firefly's.

Now Nixon saw, out in the center of this stretch of the bayou, the two green dots that were a 'gator's eyes, and his face relaxed a little with the flicker of a smile of satisfaction. His light swept the water, reached the eyes and clung, so that the stupid 'gator just lay there and stared, with the light dazzling him. His brain, not much bigger than a pea buried in the pulpy mass within his big flat head, held no thought of danger.

The twin reptile-eyes were perhaps fifty yards away when Nixon first saw them. Now he paddled more slowly, with the rowboat gliding forward soundless as a floating leaf. The grip of his right hand down by the blade of the oar-paddle tightened.

The twin eyes there among the stars on the shining water, held motionless. Presently they were only fifteen or twenty feet away, just to the right now of the uptilted empty bow of the little rowboat. Nixon stopped paddling. Slowly he rested the oar in the bottom of the boat and picked up his shotgun.

At about eight feet, Nixon fired both barrels almost together with a great crashing roar. A hundred yards ahead of him, where the bayou made its bend, there was consternation and terror among the tiny upright shapes gathered there on the soggy bank—a terror that made them scurry with tiny cries; and then, when seemingly they were not hurt by the burst of light and the vast roar, made them stand peering in wonderment at this gigantic drama out there on the water.

Nixon knew nothing of that. He was intent only on the splash where his shot had gone; and he saw that this 'gator did not sink, but was lunging away, off to the right, toward the bank. A big one, he had seen that by the spacing of the eyes and now by the water slick and the splashing as it floundered toward shore. Then he was after it, paddling with all the power of his arms as he bent forward, until in the shallows near the bank, where the mortally wounded reptile was now aimlessly floundering, he came almost on top of it.

In an instant more he was over the rowboat's side, waist deep in the water. There was a thrill to this, the lunging of his hands to grip the writhing, slimy, brainless adversary by the foreleg, threshing ashore with it as skillfully he avoided the snapping jaws, and dangerous swallowing tail. An eight foot 'gator. Good enough. Its head was an oozing mass of pulp where his shot had blown into it. Panting, he hauled it onto the soggy bank, darted back to the rowboat for his hatchet; then he had hacked into the base of the reptile's spine where the tail began, cutting into it so that the threshing stopped and the big green-black adversary lay only quivering.

Ralph would be pleased. Now if he could get another one as big as this, and then row back home—

NIXON'S thoughts suddenly went blank so that he stood over the dead 'gator with his jaw sagging in amazement. He had jerked off his headband with the light-torch when he jumped overboard from the rowboat, but there was enough starlight here for him to see the tiny upright thing. It was in a silvery patch beside a line of brush back from the water. A thing in the shape of a man. Hardly that; but it was upright, oblong with a head and a width of tiny shoulder. It stood divided at the bottom like two legs and there were two arms. A thing only a few inches high. The starlight showed it to be brown-black. Then suddenly Nixon's gasp of astonishment made him suck in his breath as he blankly stared. The tiny thing seemed to be wearing clothes...

To Nixon in those seconds, there was a blur of his mind when he wasn't thinking,

just staring as though this were something not to be explained, something which didn't have to be explained because it wasn't real, just a conjuring of his own imagination, a trick of his vision. His hand went with a puzzled gesture to brush his eyes. He blinked. One tiny, six-inch man-shape?

Abruptly he saw that the brush here seemed alive with them. They were moving now. They emitted tiny squeaks that could have been words; shouted commands to each other. But up here in the starlight of Nixon's six foot height, the sounds were like the voices of excited insects.

Adversaries? There was no such idea in Nixon's mind, those first blank seconds. Then suddenly, with a tiny hissing flash, a thread of violet light stabbed up at him. It struck one of his dangling hands with a hot little flash of tingle like the shock of a weak electric current. Then he saw where it came from—an edge of a patch of wire-grass. Three of the brown-black figures were dragging a tiny wheeled thing. A weapon. It was hardly bigger than Nixon's hand. Its nozzle slanted upward and spat another tiny violet flash. Then at his feet he felt something hit against the bottom of his leather puttee. One of the shapes was trying to climb up his leg. He could feel the weight of it on his shoe. A surprising weight, as though the six-inch thing were made of lead.

Nixon was stooping to reach down when a tiny projectile hit him in the face. It stung, with a scratching little stab of pain. Then others came. It was like a handfull of peas being thrown at him. All in a few seconds while Nixon had stood blankly staring with incredulous amazement, what seemed hundreds of the tiny shapes were around him. Attacking him. With anything normal, Nixon could think quickly. A 'gator's jaws closing on his arm, simple enough to know what to do. But now suddenly his emotion at this weird attack was only one of puzzled anger. He stooped swiftly, seized the tiny figure that was at his ankle. It screamed as his hand closed over it, a thin, high-pitched squeaking cry. But it was blood-curdling—so nearly human in its frenzied, agonized sound. As he raised it up,

still it was screaming. A heavy little thing, heavy as though it were of metal. And it was solid, so solid that his squeezing fingers could have held a leaden figure.

For an instant Nixon held the screaming little thing up and stared at it; and the starlight showed him the contorted features of its tiny bluish face, its flailing arms. Then he flung it out over the bayou. There was a little splash. The screaming stopped as the figure sank like a stone. Now abruptly, the dazed incredulous astonishment of Nixon dropped from him, and a stab of fear came; fear and a surge of anger as he realized that this attack was reality. He staggered back from the rain of tiny missiles pelting him, and another flash of the tiny wheeled gun. The ground here was black now with the lunging, milling little shapes. His first backward step trod on two or three of them, mashed their solid, heavy little bodies into the soggy ground of the bayou bank.

As he staggered, there must have been a tree root that caught his heel. At the same instant, a pellet struck his eye; and as his arm flung up and he stumbled over the root, suddenly he fell backward to the soggy sand. It was enough for the alert little figures. Their cry of triumph sounded as they pounced upon him, swarming over him. A hundred? It could have been more. Scores of scrambling things. Perhaps, small though they were, each of them weighed a pound. A hundred pounds of treading steps and jabbing arms were in an instant upon the fallen Nixon. He felt himself really frightened now, a fear that he had never felt before, no matter what the antagonist, fear engendered by the strangeness of it, the unknown.

NIXON tried to get up, but the sheer weight of the swarming little adversaries seemed pinning him down. Now they were on his throat, on his face. Tiny things jabbed at his eyes, so that his hands flailed in a frenzy, plucking them away. But then there were others. He found himself rolling, mashing them. But he couldn't mash them, he could only shove them into the ground . . .

Damned persistent, wildly reckless little things. A sweep of his arm knock a dozen of them away. Some screamed. But al-

ways there were more . . . Why didn't he get to his feet? Get up now! Knock them off! Get up! He found himself partly up, with the scrambling shapes cascading off him; but he was dizzy, his vision blurred. Another stab of the tiny weapon came. It struck him on the forehead, a hot stinging, tingling flash. For an instant it clung, with a wave of dizziness from it flooding Nixon so that he fell back, kicking, writhing . . . They were tramping over his face now. Then he realized that one of them was pounding with something heavy at his temple, a rhythmic pounding . . . *Thump . . . Thump . . .* He tried to strike at it . . . But now he knew that he couldn't focus . . . The pounding stopped. Of course. He had knocked the damned thing off . . . *Thump . . . Thump . . .* Another had started it again, every little blow making Nixon's head shudder, his senses reel and fade, so that now a dull blurred blackness was coming . . . Those cursed, tiny little blows at his temple.

Suddenly, strange in Nixon's thoughts there was the vision of himself, a monstrous fallen, wounded giant. Bewildered, dazed, helpless, with a man standing on the great expanse of his face; a man who was pounding with a crowbar against the softness of the giant's temple . . . You could fight a 'gator. Sure. You could fight a man your own size. Or several of them maybe, with your fingers itching to get at their throats and strangle them . . . But there were these jabbing, swarming things by the hundreds . . .

There was in Nixon's fading mind at last only the damnable realization of those tiny rhythmic blows at his temple, each just that small concussion of his brain, another and another until his senses fully faded and he was swept off into the dark, empty, soundless abyss of unconsciousness . . .

II

IT WAS LIKE THE ROARING OF a waterfall. You could lie near it on the grassy sward and maybe there would be a little last fading sunlight of the day to warm you. And your belly could be empty with a gnawing pain, but that was all right because there was the smell of food cooking and soon you would have it

full. A warrior returned from the hunt, had his women to cook for him . . .

The phantasmagoria of Nixon's returning consciousness as he listened to the roaring of the falling water seemed made up of queer things out of his Indian heritage. But another part of his brain told him that was absurd—told him that he was lying on something hard, with the feel of sweat bathing his skin, and pain that slowly was becoming apparent stabbing at him from scores of tiny wounds on his hands, his face, his neck.

Then suddenly Nixon knew that he had opened his eyes. He lay staring, puzzled, with a blurred scene resolving into outlines that he could distinguish, but not understand. He was lying on his back, gazing upward at what seemed a vaulted, shining metal ceiling close over his head. It was sharply curved, two or three feet above him, as though now he were lying in a shining, glowing vault. With returning strength he tried to sit up, but could not. And then he realized that he was shackled. He could see what looked like finely woven, white metallic ropes. They wrapped his arms and legs together.

The waterfall was partly the roaring of weakness in his head; but that seemed subsiding now and there was only a faintly throbbing hum somewhere near him. A hum like a dynamo, or at least some sort of mechanism. Turning his head, he saw that on one side of him the concave metal wall had a row of small bullseye windows. They were spaced about a foot apart, each the size of his fist. And in each of them there was the vision of a black abyss of sky, with white blazing stars.

Again he tried to sit up. He could bend a little at the waist, and he was able to get one elbow under him and his head up so that it was nearly to the ribbed ceiling. At once, from the other side of him, away from the bullseye windows, there was a faint, hurried scurrying of little footsteps.

A voice said, "Careful, giant!"

And another voice said, "Will he hear us, Tork?" It was a softer voice. Less harsh. English! But queerly slurred, carefully spoken. And the voices were tiny, strangely thin, of a pitch totally different from anything Nixon ever had heard.

"Tork, will he hear us? He is recovered now. Will he hear us? Oh, Tork, what will he try to do?" The English words drifted off into a language totally strange, unintelligible.

NIXON saw the two little figures. One was taller, wider than the other; the big one six inches, the other at least an inch less. They were standing on the white metal of the floor, down by his thigh. And now he realized that he was stretched out in the small interior of a metal cylinder, lying on a floor that crossed the middle of it, so that he was stretched the length of its top half. It was about a ten-foot length, and six feet wide. It left a space beside him. Little metal railings a few inches high ran along the floor, dividing it into tiny enclosures. A mechanism room; another where supplies seemed to be stored; another which had what seemed furniture in it. All in miniature. All peopled with tiny figures that had stopped their tasks, and were staring at him now in awe and fear.

"Speak, giant! Can you hear us?"

"I hear you," Nixon said. His voice rumbled, reverberating in the close confines of the curved metal walls. The sound startled the little figures down there at the floor. They peered up, tense, apprehensive. Two or three scurried away; and now Nixon saw that there were several holes along the floor where tiny ladder stairs led downward to some space beneath. Several of the frightened little figures started down the ladders and then stopped, peering up again.

"We can kill you," the figure called Tork said. He was still standing fairly close beside the great curve of Nixon's prone body, with the smaller figure beside him. Both of them were wary. Nixon could see it. They stood ready to dart away, not knowing what this trapped, bound monster might be able to do. "You do not wish that we should kill you?"

"No," Nixon said. "I sure don't." He said it wryly. He tried to smile. Kill him? These little creatures? Incredible, him lying here in this vaulted, tomb-like interior, with tiny things that could talk; things who had scientific weapons and intelligence to handle them.

"You did try to kill me," Nixon added

abruptly. "I remember it now. You—what shall I call you—Tork?"

"Tork, yes," the taller figure said. "And this with me here is Nona. We did not want to kill you—"

"Oh, you didn't?" Nixon's temper always sprang readily. He could feel his hands suddenly tingle. It was absurd that this tiny creature should speak so calmly of killing him. Why if he had his hands loose, he could seize the damned little thing, squeeze it until it screamed . . .

Unconsciously Nixon was straining at the metal ropes, with the muscles under his bronzed skin taut as he held his breath, pulling and straining. The metal posts bent inward a little with the pull; but the ropes held . . . It was a moment of horrible tenseness for his captors. He could see it as he slowly strained, exerting all his strength until the sweat poured out on his forehead and he was panting. A tense horrible moment, whole Tork and Nona stood with their tiny bluish faces turned upward, with glowing little eyes staring. Then Tork's face wrinkled into a grotesque smile as he saw Nixon's body relax. The crucial test had come and passed. They could hold this giant.

Tork said quietly, "There is a blood-tube in your throat. I could climb up there and plunge what you call a sword into it."

Nixon had heard of the jugular vein, of course. A sword, as Tork would wield it, would be only a needle. But, even so, it could have been stabbed into his jugular while he was unconscious and he might have bled to death. Or it could be stabbed into his eyes, blinding him . . .

"All right," Nixon said. "It's hard to realize—I reckon I'm beginning to understand now—"

"That we have an intelligence like your own," Tork finished. "What are you called? You have a name? Is it not so that all Earth people are named?"

"Nixon," he said. "Allen Nixon. Look here—what the devil is all this? Who are you? You've got me here in some sort of thing—"

"Our Spaceship," Tork said. "We came to Earth to get you."

"Get me? Came to Earth?"

But of course! These little creatures, so grotesquely in a sort of human mould,

couldn't belong on Earth. Nixon stared out again through the tiny bullseyes beside him at the starry abyss of the heavens. A spaceship, and he and his captors were no longer on Earth now, but hurtling out somewhere among the stars. Allen Nixon, Floridian backwoodsman, was far from a scientist. But he had read a great deal. Atomic bombs. Rockets to the Moon. That sort of thing was no longer a fantasy. Fantasy or not, he had to accept it now.

"You came to Earth—to get me?" he repeated.

"Well, not exactly you," Tork said. "We came for one of you Earth giants. We landed—a place where there would not be many of you. And then you came . . ."

STRANGE FACTS, which now Nixon's tiny captors were telling him. They had come from a small world, in that belt of asteroids which lies beyond Mars. A world which in their language was called something that sounded like Orana. And they called themselves Orites—a little civilization of them huddled on a bleak, rocky world.

This Tork—his counterpart, in our human civilization, would be a man. And the smaller figure here with him, a woman. Two sexes. But among the Orites, they were in the minority, for most of the young born to them, were neuter. And these they called Gorts. Like a slave class, who grew to maturity trained for work, for servitude. Creatures of a much lower intelligence, each trained from the beginning to some simple, standardized task.

Nixon, as he listened, could identify the Gorts, here among the groups of tiny figures within the miniature railed enclosures on the spaceship floor. A hundred or more of them had come up from underneath now, reassured that the giant was helpless. There was one area down beyond Nixon's feet where a group of some thirty of them were bending over a long trough that was high as their knees. They seemed to be eating. They were about Tork's six-inch size, these Gorts. But broader, more squarely solid-looking. Their heads were round, shining like polished leaden balls, with grey-blue faces, square-cut in a grotesque human mould.

Their garments, some grey, others of a brownish-black, seemed stiff and jointed like a coat of mail.

"Well, you've got me," Nixon said. "You're taking me now to your world?"

"Yes, that is it," Tork agreed.

"Why? What for? And you talk English—how is that?"

It was only what to them could be called a few years ago, that the Orites had been able to build a spaceship. An expedition had come to Earth. It was a spaceship built for their own size—a cylindrical ship perhaps the size of Nixon's arm. A group of them, including this Tork, had come, landed and stayed for a time. So small, coming during Earth's night, remaining hidden, then moving to other places again during night, it had been easy for them to avoid discovery by the Earth giants.

"We found that your world, it is very beautiful," Tork was saying. "Much better than our own—that you shall see. And perhaps our mind is different from yours. You do not learn strange language by listening, and remembering?"

"Well, yes, but not exactly that," Nixon said. "Children do, I suppose. So you're taking me back to your world? You say you didn't want to kill me. Why should you? What do you want of me?"

He saw Tork turn and gaze at the smaller woman-creature beside him, as though Tork wasn't sure how he should answer that question. They were standing now so that as Nixon had relaxed, prone, with his face turned sidewise, they were only a foot or so away. He could see them more clearly than before. Their garments were of some flexible, metallic fabric—a sort of square-cut tunic and trousers on Tork; and on Nona more of a drape, belted tight at the waist.

Tork's head was round and shining, like a Gort; hers had a little growth of white and gleaming hair on it. And Nixon could see other differences now. The female was curved, broad at the hips, but every tiny line of the male figure was stiffly angular. It gave Tork, and the Gorts even more so, a mechanical look—the planes of the face were all tiny rectangles, as though hewn on metal . . .

"We need you," Tork said at last. "Our scientists need one of the Earth-giants."

"Need me? What for?" Nixon demanded.

"That you shall see," Tork said. He added evasively, "There is so much about your world that you can tell us."

"There will be no harm come to you," Nona said suddenly. "My father, he is leader of the Orites in all things of science. It was he who built our first spaceship."

"I am assistant to him," Tork put in.

"And then they built this giant ship, to bring a giant to our world," Nona added, "and my father, he is working now on something else—something that will be so good for all us Orites—"

"That we can explain later, not now," Tork said hastily.

Whatever it was, Nixon couldn't make them say any more about it. The trip now stretched on while around him, down on the floor, the miniature interior was busy with the routine of the voyage. Beneath him, he understood now, were the mechanism rooms, the air renewers, pressure equalizers, temperature controls, and the gravity engines—whatever they were. Perhaps, if he had been an Earth scientist, Tork would have tried to find the English words to explain them. But Tork did not, and Allen Nixon wasn't curious. To him it was enough that this strange thing was a fact.

His mind was busy with thoughts of how to escape from these weird little captors. Certainly he had no desire to be taken to this strange world. Tork's queer glance at Nona had seemed somehow to have a gruesome implication. If only he could get Tork within his fingers—

AFTER a time Nixon slept. He was hungry and thirsty when he awoke. Down on the floor the Gorts were busy with their routine tasks. They were getting used to the monstrous prisoner now. None seemed to notice that he had opened his eyes. Then he saw Tork, in the little enclosure beyond Nixon's feet, where the cylindrical interior narrowed. It seemed to be the bow of the spaceship. A bullseye port was there, with a vista of the stars. There was a foot-high bank like an instrument panel, with rows of tiny dials hardly bigger than his smallest fingernail. They glowed with faint streams of lights.

He saw Tork there, among the tiny controls.

"Tork!" he called.

Presently Tork came running along the floor and stood by Nixon's face.

"You awaken?" Tork said. "You giants sleep a very long time. We know that, of course. And you have slept even longer."

Nixon could well believe it. He was rested now. Far more clear-headed and alert, he realized, than he had been before, and the many tiny wounds on him didn't hurt so much now.

"I'm hungry and thirsty," he said. "I suppose you know that giants eat, don't you?"

Tork's weird slit of mouth widened and his bluish face knotted into a grotesque smile. "We had planned for that before we caught you," he said. "Water—your earth-water we have in tanks here. We have studied your food. In Orana our chemists studied it, and we have concentrated it for you. And perhaps some of our own things you will like."

Feeding this bound giant was quite a problem. The Gorts struggled now with a great ladder, resting it against Nixon's shoulder, carrying pails of water up to his chest, pouring them into his mouth, each not much more than a thimbleful. Then a long line of them came, each with a chunk of food, a mouthful for Nixon. But it was gratifying, if queer-tasting, and at last he had had enough.

The days slowly passed, while the tiny ship plunged on through the abyss of space. Days? There was here nothing but the same humming, glowing interior, and outside through the tiny bullseyes, the vast unchanging panorama of the stars. Nixon slept when he could; and when he was thirsty or hungry, he called for Tork to order the Gorts to their task. A hundred of them, whose only work was to feed him.

Nixon realized now that these little people slept very often. Watching them, it seemed that every two or three hours they needed sleep. A lifespan, probably much shorter than ours. Ten years from birth to old age, perhaps. This trip to Orana, as Tork once explained, to them was a very long, tedious voyage. To Nixon it would be while he slept perhaps twenty or twenty-five times.

"If you would let one of my hands loose," Nixon told Tork once, "you wouldn't have to carry the food and water up to me. Have the Gorts put it beside me, down there on the floor and that's enough."

He did his best to persuade Tork. After all, what could he do to escape, even if they turned him loose? A lunge, even an incautious movement, could wreck this little ship. Kill them all, but it would kill him too.

"You don't reckon I'm that foolish," Nixon said.

"No, I do not," Tork agreed.

"Then turn me loose. It's silly to keep me shackled like this. Causes you a lot of trouble."

But Tork only grinned his grotesque grin and shook his head.

"Why not?" Nixon argued. "What can I do?"

"You could reach and seize me," Tork said grimly. "You could hold me with your fingers. And to save my life, would I not order the Gorts to turn us back to Earth? That you could do. Have you not thought of it?"

Nixon had indeed. Something like that was what he had been planning. These tiny captors weren't so dumb.

But as the time passed and they told him that now the orbit of Mars was crossed and presently their world of Orana would lie ahead of them, Nixon had in some measure won the confidence of Nona. Sometimes when he called to her she would come and climb the long ladder at his shoulders and sit on his chest and talk to him. At first she was timid, but then as her confidence grew she got over it. Under her questions Nixon passed the long hours telling her about Earth.

"But you saw a good deal of it yourself, Nona. You made two trips there."

"Yes," she agreed. "But it is a world so gigantic, it did not look anything of the way you tell it to me."

"And I guess your world will look pretty different to me," he said, "from the way it does to you."

But she was queerly reticent about her world. He decided that Tork had warned her not to talk about it.

At another time it occurred to Nixon to ask how they had gotten his huge body

into their ship. She described how it had been dragged in with cables. A dozen little electronic engines, and the pulling of about five hundred Gorts who were here on board. But to get him out they had planned it differently. Even though shackled, he could perhaps hitch himself along, just a little at a time, out through the bow of the ship which was built so that the whole of it would spread apart.

"Of course I can," Nixon agreed. "I certainly don't want to make it hard, Nona. If you people got so you could trust me—"

"I think my father will trust you," she said suddenly. "Yes, that I think."

Then there came the time when Nona gestured toward the front port of the ship, down past Nixon's feet. "There is Orana," she said.

He saw it then, a great silvery crescent which had swung into view. During the hours it enlarged, until presently it was filling all that area of the sky. And a little later, Nona came climbing up the ladder to his chest.

"When you have slept the next time," she said, "we shall be there."

She seemed frightened. He could interpret more readily the expressions on her tiny, bluish face now.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

She said, "Tork has seen with the telescope that a storm may be there when we land."

"A storm on your world? Oh, I see. Well, we have storms. Wind and rain. And I told you about a snowstorm—"

But she burst out: "A storm on Orana—Oh, giant, if only you could help us! That is what my father thinks—that you will be able to help us live on our world!"

A storm on Orana . . . somehow it made him shudder, hearing the terror in her tiny voice.

III

HE SLEPT AGAIN. AND WHEN he awoke the little interior of the Orite spaceship was busy with the activities of landing. Through one of the bullseye ports beside him, Nixon started down at the strange new world. Beneath them now it was a great, darkly dim expanse of gaunt naked mountains. A place, by the

look of it, seemingly of monstrous desolation.

The spaceship settled lower. Now Nixon could see the huge, naked mountain peaks. They were like greenish polished spires of glass, towering up into a queer orange-tinted haze of the Orana night. Beneath the topping spires, the vast gaunt mountains spread out in serrated ranks. The sides of them were polished cliff-ramps, bleak, precipitous slopes dropping down into the great chasms of the valleys where the orange haze was thicker so that the bottoms were an empty blur.

He found Nona standing down on the floor, between him and the bullseye port.

"There—Orana," she said.

He was puzzled. "But Tork told me it was a very small asteroid," he said. "Those mountains, those canyons — so huge—"

A little world, but so monstrously contorted by some great cataclysm of nature in its birth, that everything on it was tremendous. As Nixon stared down, it seemed that there could be easily ten miles, as distance would be measured on Earth, between the tops of these towering spires and the ragged gashes of deeps between them. A vast world, vast with the hugeness of this amazing panorama of utter, bleak desolation. Somehow there was a majesty to it. A brooding landscape, awesome in its sweep of barren immensity. And it was sinister—the monstrous, brittle-looking cliff-faces, smooth and green, with the orange hazes whirling about them, and the shadows in the depths murky with purple mystery.

"It looks large to you?" Nolan said. "Then you can understand how much bigger it looks to us."

He could try to see it from their viewpoint. To them he was a seventy-foot giant—and so to them these immense slashed metal mountains must seem titanic. A harsh world, with nature cruel and relentless, so that on it these tiny creatures had struggled, were struggling, for a bare existence . . .

Now the little Spaceship had settled lower so that the swirling orange haze was like a veil around it. A thousand feet away, outside this porte, Nixon could see a dim blur of smooth almost vertical cliff-face sliding upward as they sank.

"Nona, come." It was Tork, here on the floor with Nona. A line of Gorts went past, dragging a wheeled apparatus. Nixon recognized it as the little electronic gun which had spat its flash at him, back there on the bank of the Florida bayou.

Tork called a command to the Gorts, and then he herded Nona away and stood looking up into Nixon's down-turned face. "You, giant," he said. "You will take orders from me now? You will do what I tell you?"

"Maybe," Nixon said slowly. He had come to dislike Tork's small arrogance. "Are you going to turn me loose?"

"That is impossible," Tork said shortly. "I want you to know, if you are helpful it will be for your good. Can you understand that?"

"You've said it enough so I reckon I should," Nixon retorted.

"When we land, I will direct you," Tork said. "The home—the place where we will keep you—to your size it will be quite close. I will direct you to it."

Then the turmoil of the landing drew Tork away. With the orange mists almost solid outside the little port, presently Nixon felt the spaceship rock and bump, and then settle quiescent. The interior was a babble of the excited, tiny voices of the Orites, and the throbbing grind of mechanisms as the ports were opened. The outer air came in with a swirling rush, heavy wisps of tinted vapour, spreading like a visible gas. Nixon's first breath of it was choking. It had a heavy, chemical smell. He coughed, but after a moment he found that, though it was dankly oppressive, making his lungs tingle and burn and his head feel unsteady, he could breathe it.

For a moment, Nona was here again. "The storm air," she said.

"The storm is coming?" he said. "Or is this the storm, outside there now?"

"No, no, but it is coming."

THE GRIND of the interior mechanisms had ceased, but then they began again. Nixon saw now that the vaulted ceiling of the little Spaceship was slowly being raised. It seemed hinged at about his waist and from the bow beyond his feet it was rising up. And then there past his feet, the bow-section spread apart. The orange mist, darker than ever, swirled in

around him. Beside him, lines of Gorts were hurriedly carrying things out of the ship. Presently all the tiny figures had disembarked. Nixon was lying in the narrow, vaulted little cylinder with its top and end down by his feet fully opened. Over him, from the waist down, there was the tossed, storm-filled murk of the new world—a blur with only a distant monstrous crag dimly visible. Silence was around him here, but outside there was the weird muttering voice of the oncoming storm.

For that moment a panic struck at Nixon. He was wrapped with metal ropes from head to foot, and still chained to the little lines of metal posts beside him. It was as though he were lying bound, here in a partly opened coffin. Had the Orites abandoned him, scurrying away in their terror of the storm?

"Ready," shouted Tork. And as Nixon shifted his head, he saw his captor standing at the foot of one of the posts that came up past Nixon's ear. Tork was loosening the cable, casting it off. Then he was at each of the others. Presently Nixon's bound body was free from its lashings.

"Careful now, giant!" Tork said. He cast off the last cable, down by Nixon's feet; and then he darted back, turned and ran hurriedly out of the opened bow. His shouted voice came in.

"Come out now," Tork called. "Be careful!"

Nixon could bend at the waist a little, and bend at the knees. His arms could move to get an elbow under him when he turned sidewise. Grimly it occurred to him that he could roll over perhaps, or lunge and wreck this cursed little cylinder.

"Come now!" Tork called sharply. "And surely we will kill you if there is trouble."

Feet first, slowly, laboriously, Nixon inched his way along and out of the spread bow of the spaceship.

The world of Orana. A curious bristling sward was under him. Around him, the acrid orange air swirled and sucked. At first he could see nothing but an orange blur. Then off to one side, on a dim slope some twenty feet away, he saw that a terraced pyramid was standing—a pyramid with its top third sliced off. The Orite city. A community dwelling. It was

one of three here. Dimly Nixon could make out the outlines of the other two, further away up the slope. They were all three about of a size—some fifty feet square at the base and twenty feet high up their terraced sides to the flat roof. Tiny lights gleamed like window eyes along the terraces at different levels about a foot apart; and now Nixon could see the little Orite figures moving there on the ramparts, with their thin voices babbling, excited by the return of the Spaceship with its giant from Earth.

"Keep going," Tork was calling. He was off to one side, down by Nixon's feet. A crowd of Gorts stood further back, watching. And from the nearest pyramid, other Orites were coming. Some, the young, were only an inch or so high. Groups of them clustered timidly around a mother. A stiff formation of what seemed the slave Gorts was standing in a double line. Several hundred of them. The little wheeled guns were with them. The guns pointed at Nixon. Alert Gort commanders stood ready to attack the giant if it became necessary.

"Keep going," Tork called again.

HE stood cautiously to one side, ten feet from Nixon's lashed ankles. He moved along to keep there, as Nixon moved. Nixon had shifted three or four lengths of his body from the spaceship now. Suddenly, as for a moment he relaxed, panting from the effort, he found Nona walking here on the ground near his face. Of them all, she was the least afraid of him. She was so close now that a flip of his head could have knocked her down.

"Hurry," she urged. "There is a place for you—"

"How far away? What sort of place?" he demanded.

"It is, what you call a—" She suddenly checked herself. "Oh giant, you hear that? The storm—coming now!"

He heard it. The distant, rumbling storm voice had abruptly intensified — a rumble that now was separated into a fusillade of crackling explosions. The orange air was swirling crazily, swirling and crackling.

Then in the full intensity of its fury, the Orana storm burst upon them.

IV

THE ORANGE RAIN CAME down in a pelting deluge, with a steady blast of the wind. Under the impact of it Nixon stopped his hitching movement along the ground and lay motionless. Overhead the clouds were turning green. Great masses of smoking, turgid vapour swung majestically like the slow-motion image of a cyclone.

In the orange-green murk Nixon could see the crowds of little figures running frantically for the shelter of the pyramid-cities. The nearer pyramid was dimly visible through the blur. Tiny lights were glowing there now, seemingly all over it. Not the lights of the windows. He could still see the little spaced rows of them at the foot-high levels. This was a purple glow — a sheen of light-fire. It seemed something to protect the city from the storm. Up at the flat-top roof, fifty feet above the ground, the purple light-fire stood up in little crossed beams.

The heavy orange rain increased. They were queerly solid raindrops. They stung Nixon's face like hail so that he tried to shield himself by twisting around. The cries of the running Orites were faint little screams in the roar. He saw a sucking whirl of wind knock a group of them down. Then they rose, struggled on, trying to get to the sheltering doorways of the city. The raindrops were like hail, of different sizes. He saw an Orite struck by one that to the little six-inch figure was monstrous. The Orite fell lay motionless.

Now the rain-water was coming in rills down the rocky slope. The rills were rivers to the fleeing Orites. A group of them were cut off. They milled around in panic, then they came running back toward Nixon. Suddenly as they neared him, he saw that Nona was among them. She was running, staggering. A blob of rain-drop barely missed felling her.

He called, "Nona! Nona!"

The voice of the giant. It rumbled with a roar, mingling with the roar of the storm. Through the swirling murk, with the haven of the purple-glowing pyramid blurred in the distance, Nixon could see that the slope was dotted by fallen figures. Some of them lay with the cascading rivulets of water tumbling over them; others

were being washed away down the slope. Half of the Orite crowd perhaps had reached the city. The others were caught out here, surging back in a panic toward the giant, momentarily more in terror of the storm than of him. And Nixon knew now what he could do to give them at least partial shelter.

"Nona!" he called. "Come over here by me! Tell them—all of them come here!"

Then they were coming, and Nixon lay on his side, with his back to the wind and rain. For them there was shelter, here against the giant figure so that in a moment a hundred or more of them were huddling here. He lay tensed, motionless. Down his length he could dimly see the mass of tiny figures crouched in the lee of his body, with the choking mists and the rain whirling high above them. Presently he could feel the rivulets of water backing up against him, as though he were a monstrous dam stretched here. He realized that his body was blocking the water, keeping it from surging like a flood upon the Orites he was sheltering.

He said, "You're all right now, Nona? Better now?"

She was crouching against his chest. He heard her answering call. "Yes. Oh yes, giant."

He lay through an interval. And now through the storm came a burst of lightning—a crackling burst with a roar like thunder. But it was very different lightning from anything Nixon had ever seen! It seemed to strike one of the distant cliffs. There was a sustained crackling for a second or two, then an orange-green burst of light. It was like a bomb striking the cliff-face, with masses of rock hurled into the blur of the air. A chunk, perhaps as big as Nixon's forearm, fell clattering across the slope. Now he saw the meaning of the purple light-fire like a barrage around and above the pyramid-city. It was a barrage of some strange electronic nature, to act like a lightning rod. Presently a crackling bolt hit it—a great burst, a blob of pyrotechnics in the air above the city roof. It crackled for a second and then harmlessly was swept away, dissipating into the murk.

An hour passed, with the storm raging while Nixon lay taut with the crowd of Orites huddled against him. Then it

seemed that the wind and rain were lessening. And presently a rift came in the wheeling orange clouds—a rift with a pallid opalescent light breaking through. The Orana moon. As the clouds at last wheeled and swung away, the firmament of stars was spread overhead—pin-points of fire in the Orana night-sky, with the moon a huge crescent of opalescent shimmer. It bathed the glistening wet slope, strewn with the tiny dead figures. It edged with pallid silver the frowning ramparts of the distant mountains . . .

PRESENTLY the daylight came. There was a swift, brightening twilight of flat, pale glow; and then all in a few minutes there was full daylight as the sun mounted above the cliffs. Out here beyond Mars, it was a sun small and pale. Nixon's first Orana day. The sunlight had warmth, a grateful warmth that soon was drying him. In it the bound Nixon lay quiet. Momentarily the giant was ignored. The wet slope was steaming in the sunlight. Nona and the Orites whom he had sheltered had fled into the city as soon as the storm abated. The barrage glow had gone from the pyramids. Gorts were carrying in the dead and wounded.

A queer ironic feeling of his helplessness was in Nixon as he lay waiting, wondering what these strange little captors would try to do to him next. This world of civilized humans all in miniature, so tiny, made it seem absurd that he should have to lie here, patiently waiting for what would happen to him. But every moment as he gazed around at the busy little Orite world, revealed by the daylight, his respect for it grew. Quite evidently these were a scientific people. A totally different science from anything on Earth, so that he could never grasp it. A science, compared to his own Earth-world, which in many ways was probably less advanced, yet in other ways more so.

Beyond the three pyramid cities he could see tilled fields in which tiny things were growing. Little furrows ridged them. Gorts were working there, with miniature machines that scurried like bugs along the ground. Now after the storm, Orites were trudging in from the hills, a rural population living out in the recesses of the cliffs, and in huts along the ground. A few of

their little dwellings were visible in the nearer distance, mounds about a foot high. Some of the people living out there came carrying those who had been hurt in the storm—for medical attention—in the pyramid-cities, Nixon surmised. Others evidently came out of curiosity to see the giant from Earth. At a respectful distance which to Nixon was five or six feet away, a crowd of them was gathering. Men and women, and the young some of which were hardly more than an inch high, clinging to a mother as they stared at the prone giant. It was a jabbering, excited crowd, augmented now by Orites who streamed out from the cities.

The nearer cliff of the canyon-side, as Nixon saw it, was fairly close here. It rose sheer, shining green in the sunlight. There was another building over there against the cliff bottom—a building which looked like a small cairn of stones. It was about two or three feet high. Its tiny oval windows, even now in the daylight, had a violet light in them; and at a peak from the top of it, colored vapour was streaming up.

"We are ready to attend to you now, giant." The Orite voice near Nixon's head startled him. Then he saw that Tork had arrived, and that Nona was behind him. Other Orites had come from the nearest of the pyramids and were gathered around Tork. Quite evidently they were important here. Somehow the look of them suggested advanced age; men a little bent, shriveled of outline, with robes that were ornamented for the dignity of their rank. Their wrinkled, bluish faces were solemn with dignity. There were some twenty of them. They stood in tiny groups, gazing, whispering to each other.

"Attend to me?" Nixon said. "It's time you turned me loose, isn't it?"

If he could only persuade them to free him! From the beginning Nixon had pondered how he could escape and get back to Earth. Certainly this had been an extraordinary adventure, but already he had had enough of it. If the Orites would free him now, it would be simple enough to force them to take him back in the Spaceship. Or would it? Nixon felt a queer shuddering, like a premonition. Why had they brought him here? What were they planning to do with him?

"Turn you loose," Tork was saying, and Nixon thought he could detect something like sarcasm in that small voice.

"Or at least, thank me," Nixon said. He grinned. Among his own kind on Earth, his was an appealing grin. But the great ruddy expanse of his face with the black stubble of beard which now was growing on it, wrinkled by that grin, certainly had no reassuring appeal for these tiny Orites. And Nixon knew it.

Absurd that he should have to wheedle these little captors! Nixon always had a hot temper and it rose in him now as from the Orites there came only a staring, blank silence. Despite his bonds, he could roll and lunge and kill hundreds of them! But what would it get him? The Gorts would mass for battle and kill him. Or if they couldn't—if even he wrecked all this miniature civilization here, there would be nothing left for him to do but lie here on this strange little world and starve to death.

He mastered his anger. He would have to be docile, do what he was told, for now at least.

"I helped you in the storm, didn't I?" he added. "I saved maybe hundreds of you from being killed. The last thing I want is to hurt any of you."

"My father is coming," Nona put in. She had turned at the sound of a voice calling from the pyramid entrance where other Orites were emerging. "My father is called Frane," Nona added. "I have told him that you want to be our friend." She flung a glance at Tork as she said it; but Tork ignored her and turned away, whispering to some of the dignitaries.

THEN Nona's father stood with her. Frane was obviously aged. His shoulders were square and thin, with an ornate robe draping them. He bore himself with the commanding dignity of his age and rank as leading scientist here.

"I thank you, giant, for what you have done." His voice was thin and high, his words slow, carefully intoned. "For myself, I would trust you. But these men who rule us—" His gaze went to the group with whom Tork was whispering as he added, "have decided against me."

Tork whirled around. "We do not dare

give our world into the keeping of this monster."

It brought a babble of agreement from the listening Orites, most of whom quite evidently understood the Earth language.

"Why did you bring me here?" Nixon demanded. "You certainly went to plenty of trouble."

"To be of help to us," Frane said. "There is no reason why I should not tell you."

Frane in his laboratory here, with Tork as his assistant, for years had been working on a momentous chemical discovery. Drugs to cause a size-change of the human body; to alter the size of every tiny cell, without changing its shape.

Frane gestured. "That is my laboratory, off there." He was indicating the cairn-like little building with the oval violet windows, at the base of the cliff.

A growth-drug. A generation ago they had done it with plants to some extent. "Perhaps you know," Frane was saying, "that natural growth is not steady. It comes in spurts, a rapid growth, a resting, then growth again."

And this new drug would greatly accelerate the growing periods—a vast and rapid acceleration into a size far beyond what nature ordinarily would have attained. Frane's growth-drug was now nearing success.

"To make us Orites perhaps as large as you," Frane was saying. "Then we could dominate our world more easily."

Nixon could understand the desire. This miniature civilization was like a colony of ants on Earth. He could imagine an ant-hill swept by an Earth-storm; a forest fire, with millions of insects scuttling before it, and millions of others consumed by it. This Orana storm, to Nixon, had been bad enough; but to many of the Orites it had been fatal.

"You brought me here," Nixon said, "and yet you hope to make yourselves as big as I am. Why did you need me?"

Tork had approached. His face bore a triumphant leer. "They say it is better to stop this talk with the giant now," he said to Frane.

Orders from Frane's superiors. It was obvious. "Later, giant," Frane said. His face was serious, and Tork's leer of triumph, somehow made Nixon shudder.

"I beg you, for your own good, cause no trouble," Frane added hastily. "You understand that, giant?"

"Yes," Nixon said.

"We have a home for you," Tork said suavely.

"A home? Where?"

"Not far." Tork gestured toward a butte-like rock that rose from the slope, over in the direction of the nearer cliff. To Nixon it was only some fifty feet away. "And you will be made quite comfortable," Tork added smilingly. "Our Gorts will feed you and take care of you."

Then slowly, feet first, the bound Nixon was hitching himself past the pyramid-city. A thousand little eyes watched him tensely. The rock was about twenty feet high. As his feet neared it, Nixon saw that Orites were up on the rock-ridges some ten feet above the ground. Tiny apparatus was up there. Nixon hardly noticed the crescent line of finger-size holes in the ground as he hitched over them. As his feet neared the bottom of the rock, he heard Tork calling,

"Enough, giant! Lie quiet!"

Tork gave a signal. From up on the tiny ledge of rock, the Orites answered it. The apparatus up there glowed, hummed. From the crescent line of holes in the rocky ground around Nixon, tiny purple beams of light, shot up vertically into the air—beams of radiance about six inches apart. They streamed up, sharp and clear for twenty or thirty feet and faded into the sunlit air. It was a crescent fence of light, from one end of the butte, out in a fifteen foot loop around the prone Nixon, bending until it touched the other end of the butte.

At the same moment Gorts rushed in, between the six-inch vertical light-bars. Nixon could feel them with tiny electro-torches burning at the knots of the ropes binding him. The ropes fell away. He was free. The Gorts scattered in a panic, running out between the upstanding purple rays.

Nixon's clothes were smouldering in several places from the tiny torches. The flesh of his wrists was burned. He beat out the smouldering fabric and staggered to his feet.

"Careful now, giant!" It was Tork's voice coming in to him from beyond the

radiance of the bars of purple light. Somehow Tork's sneering warning enraged Nixon. Was this a cage? A cage of light-fire in which these damnable little creatures thought they could hold the Earth-giant? He'd show them!

Nixon's rage blurred his reason or he would have been more wary. With an oath that was thunder to the Orites, he hurled himself against the purple bars. The Orites' apprehensive cries mingled with a crackling, hissing shower of sparks. It was as though Nixon had struck something solid. He was aware of a shock, a resisting thrust, a repulsion that galvanized all his body as it hurled him backward.

Enveloped by the spark-shower, with his clothes smouldering and his flesh burned, he fell writhing in the center of his purple cage.

NIXON BARELY CLUNG TO HIS senses. Then after a moment he knew that his head was clearing, that he was brushing his smouldering clothes frantically with his hands. Around him the radiance from the glowing purple bars was dazzling. But presently he could see between them, and see the crescent of blue sky overhead. Between two of the bars, in the six-inch vertical slit of space, an Orite figure appeared. It was Nona. She came carefully in and stood looking at him.

"You are not too badly hurt?" she said anxiously. "You should not have tried that."

"So they send *you*?" Nixon said bitterly. "What for? To get me ready for some new trickery?"

Then Nixon saw that her father was behind her. "We understand your feelings," Frane said. "I would trust you, but you see I have not enough power here. I am only a man of science; I have nothing to do with the government. Not many of the Gorts will take orders from me."

He seemed wholly sincere, so that Nixon smiled grimly. "All right. I think I am beginning to understand."

And Tork, who in rank was only Frane's assistant, seemed to have the confidence of those Government leaders.

"The Gorts will come and bring you food and water," Nona said.

"There will be five hundred Gorts just

to be trained for your needs," Frane offered. "If they come now, you will not harm them so that they have to attack and kill you?"

Whatever thoughts of wishful thinking Nixon had had that these little people could kill him, now certainly were dispelled. "Okay," Nixon agreed. "You have my promise. I won't hurt the Gorts."

"Thank you," Frane said gravely. He turned away . . .

V

A DOZEN or more of the Orana days and nights went by. Nona often came to talk with the giant. Then she brought a young Orite with her named Loto. He seemed about her own age. He spoke English. He was, Nona said, studying to be a scientist. From him and Nona, Nixon now learned many details of the little asteroid world. The rotation of Orana on its axis gave an alternate daylight and darkness of about six hours each. There was about the same gravity as Earth, because the asteroid was so extremely dense. And the moon here was a smaller twin of Orana, one revolving around the other.

The days were mostly sunlit, sometimes with swirls of orange and purple clouds. There was no rain; the rain fell only during the infrequent storms. The nights were opalescent moonlight; then with a period when the moon-twin had moved into the hours of the day, and showed only as a dull crescent in the sunlight.

Through the glowing purple bars, Nixon could see the miniature Orite world busy with its routine of life. The cairn-mound of Frane's laboratory was only a few yards distant along the cliff. Day and night its tiny oval windows gleamed with the violet radiance.

Still Nixon had no idea of why he had been brought here. He had demanded it of Nona and Loto, but always they avoided it. Nona looked frightened, and the youthful Loto was gravely solemn. To say the least, their look was anything but reassuring. Then one day, they told him.

"You are a giant," Nona said. "Originally my father wanted to study the growth-factors of larger creatures. On our first visit to your Earth, several of

them were brought here. They were very young, not too terribly big then to be caught and brought here. But they grew so fast."

Again that queer look was on her face as she added, "They are all dead now, except one. It is, I think, what you call a panther. It is caged in a cave—" She gestured. "Out there in a nearby valley—a cave, with the purple barrage like this across the entrance."

"Studying the growth of larger creatures," Nixon echoed. "And now these animals are all dead but one! What you're trying to tell me—your father and Tork experimented on them. Is that it?"

"In the interest of science," Loto said hastily. "That is done on your Earth, isn't it?"

And then they had realized that, if the growth-drug Frane was after was to be effective on the human Orites, a human giant from Earth would be the best on which to experiment. So Tork had been sent to get one.

Nixon stared. "Keep me here, telling me I'll not be harmed until you're ready to vivisect me!"

"No! No—" the Orite girl cried vehemently. "Not that! Never! Father has promised it!"

"He has found that his work does not need it," Loto said earnestly. "Believe us, that is true. The panther has not yet been used. Perhaps it never will be. And Frane does not need you. He thought that he would. But now he's almost sure it isn't necessary."

"And Tork is still trying to persuade your leaders to have Frane—use me?" Nixon demanded.

"Yes," Loto admitted. "That is so. You see, the drugs are so terribly important to us—"

"But my father needs nothing more," Nona said. "Except perhaps, my giant, there will be blood samples—"

"And a little tissue to be studied with our microscopes," Loto put in. "And secretion, perhaps, from the pituitary gland—"

A grave little group of scientists, with Frane, came one day for specimens from the giant. Then they came again. Their tiny surgical instruments were like needles pricking and Nixon only laughed grimly.

But would Frane succeed with his experiments? It seemed now as though Nixon's life hung on that. Then there was a day when Nona said impulsively,

"My father is more sure than ever of success. But Tork refuses to believe it."

"Refuses?" Nixon echoed. "Look here, what you mean by that? I reckon there's still plenty you're not telling me, Nona."

There was indeed! There was so much going on out there in the busy little Orite world that the caged giant could not see. Nona and Loto tried to explain it.

"Tork is surely planning something," Loto said. "Something more than just working for the success of the drug."

There had been rumors of trouble. Talk of plans that were being made by secret meetings in the night. And Tork's followers seemed increasing. More and more the rumors involved him as a leader.

"Planning what?" Nixon demanded. "Is he aiming to seize your government?"

Perhaps it was that. Frane himself could not believe that Tork had any sinister plans; for so many years he had trusted Tork. And Frane was absorbed with his work. An impractical old man.

"So are most of our leaders," Loto said bitterly. "Too old. What you would call rusting on the job."

"One thing I'm sure," Nixon said. "Whatever that fellow Tork is up to, he'd mighty well like to tack my hide to his cabin door."

THE days passed. And Nixon saw himself like a monstrous dumb creature waiting to be slaughtered. There must be something that he could do to get out of here! He began planning it and as the plan evolved, the thing looked feasible, if only he could persuade Nona and the youthful Loto!

He put his plan to them one evening when they came to talk to him, as they now did quite often. In the glow of the purple bars he sat with the two small figures perched on his upraised knee.

"Look," Nixon said softly. "I'm not willing to go on like this. And you—you're just stalling around giving Tork and his men every chance to pull off what they're after."

Nixon felt desperate, and he knew he looked it—ragged and dirty, his clothes

tattered where the barrage had burned them, and his face with sunken cheeks covered by a ragged growth of black beard. And he knew he was ill. The lack of exercises perhaps, because always on Earth Allen Nixon had been used to great muscular activity. The food and water the Gorts brought him, lately had been distasteful. It was strange stuff, at best. And there was the apprehension of his fate—the damnable sitting and waiting.

"Whatever Tork is after," Nixon was saying, "it's something Frane would not want. Nor you—nor any of those who are like you. For your sake as well as mine, you've got to go into this with me."

He persuaded them at last. Loto had the youthful, reckless enthusiasm of youth. He was like Nixon himself, in that! And they both trusted the giant.

"Tonight will be best," Loto said. "Greev will be on duty—"

Greev was one of the Orite guards in charge of the barrage mechanism. His little post was back in a recess on a ledge of the butte. From where Nixon was sitting its cave-entrance was dimly visible off at the left end where the barrage ended at the rock-face. To Nixon it was about ten feet up; to the Orites it was a climb of about a hundred feet, up a steep winding rock-path from the other side of the butte. Greev was a rough fellow who had seemed much interested in Nona. Often he had urged her to come up there and sit with him through the long tedious hours of his duty.

"What time would be best?" Nixon demanded.

"I could go soon after the moon-rise," Nona said.

An hour from now. Nona would talk to the guard. She would contrive that just for a moment or two they would leave the little cave-entrance, walking along the ledge in the shimmer of the moon. And, unseen, Loto would be up there.

"It can be done," Nixon said. "You're sure you understand the mechanisms, Loto?"

"Oh yes, yes."

Perched on the seated giant's upraised knee, Loto and Nona suddenly clutched at the huge folds of his trousers to keep from falling as the knee jerked. And Nixon's hand had gone up to his forehead—

a sweep of wind that was like a little swirl of storm.

"What's the matter?" Loto demanded anxiously.

"I don't know," Nixon murmured. "I sure feel sick."

A wave of nausea and dizziness had swept him, convulsing his muscles. "This food I get here don't seem to agree with me," Nixon added. "Lately, I—"

He sucked in his breath as the incapable thought came to him.

"Poison!" he gasped. "That's it! Poisoning me—those damned little—"

"Not so loud!" Loto murmured. "You're voice is a roar. It could be heard up there in the control room."

Poisoning the giant! His body was so tremendous that they could only give him enough to be slow-acting, making him gradually sick. Nona and Loto were aghast. More than ever now, this plan to free the giant and let him rule this world as Frane and the others would want it ruled, must succeed tonight.

"Maybe it isn't poison. It could be a sleeping drug," Loto said.

"Sure! To knock me out and vivisect me!" Nixon rasped grimly. "What difference?"

FOR a time longer they discussed the details of their plan, while Nixon sat fighting the weird feelings that were sweeping him. Then Nona and Loto quietly left, walking out between the up-standing purple bars. And Nixon was alone, waiting for moonrise . . . This cursed sickness! He fought with it. He was bathed in cold sweat now, with a shuddering chill creeping through him. But it was some hours since he had had anything to eat or drink. He'd certainly take nothing more.

The minutes slowly dragged, with an apprehension of tenseness in the waiting Nixon. Now doubts were assailing him. Would Greev be suspicious, with Nona coming up to visit him tonight when she had always refused before? Would Loto be able to get into the control room unseen? Sometimes Gorts were around up there. Would they oppose him?

And where was Tork tonight? At this time, almost always he was in his apartment in one of the pyramid-cities. Frane

now was in his laboratory; Tork would join him there later. But sometimes Tork vanished on one of his mysterious missions. And it occurred to Nixon that possibly tonight, with poison slowly overcoming the giant, Tork himself might be planning to do something . . .

Then Nixon suddenly was aware that out through the glowing purple bars, the stars were paling above the distant cliffs. The moon was rising. The time had come! Nixon still sat quiet, hunched against the face of the rock. Diagonally up over his head, the little entrance of the control room was visible. It glowed with radiance. Occasionally the tiny blob of Greev showed as he moved about. Was Loto already up there? He had said that there were places where he could climb up without using the path. And to a six-inch Orite the ledge up there outside the control room was broken and crag-strewn so that Loto easily could hide.

Now Nixon saw the figure of Nona, a pale little blob in the moonlight as she mounted the path. A moment more and she was in the glowing recess with Greev. No Gort had challenged her. Good enough! Another interval and then the guard and Nona came out on the ledge, stood a moment and then moved along it.

Loto's chance! Slowly Nixon stood up, stretching as thought casually yawning. His head reeled. His ears were roaring. This accursed sickness! . . . But now he saw the blob of Loto in the control room! Nixon tensed.

A sudden humming and hissing of current sounded overhead. The barrage went down! The purple bars of light crackled for an instant and were gone!

The giant was free! Overhead he heard the shout of Greev. A spreading alarm, with the voice of Gorts up on the rock; and others out on the rocky slope. Nixon leaped. He was aware that it was a staggering step so that he almost fell. But he recovered himself, staggered on toward the rock-slope. Everywhere there was a turmoil of frightened little voices. This damnable dizziness! But it could be conquered. Nixon shook himself, trying to straighten and get his balance. Now he was aware that a line of Gorts was before him. Behind him the glow of the barrage sprang up again, Greev had evident-

ly rushed back to his post. But it was too late! The giant was out!

In that confused instant, with all the moonlit scene swaying before him, Nixon saw that the attacking Gorts were dragging up lines of wires mounted in foot-high frames. Grids of wire, with cables that led to little wheeled batteries. And Tork was with them. Nixon heard his voice and saw his little figure scurrying in the background. Perhaps Tork had planned this before the barrage went down, or perhaps he had just come, responding to the alarm . . . What matter? Nixon could scatter this strange little attack with a kicking, scrambling rush . . .

In that second Nixon knew that his thoughts were blurred by the roaring in his head. He knew that he was staggering ahead to scatter the Gorts. But there was no time. The grids of wires glowed and crackled. For just another moment it seemed that they were building up the electronic potential of a bolt. Then one of them reached it. A little puff of crackling violet leaped upward. It struck Nixon in the chest.

Nixon knew nothing except that he was staggering, falling . . .

VI

SLOWLY NIXON REALIZED that he was coming back to consciousness. He felt that he was lying on the ground. He tried to move, but something was holding him. At first the roaring in his head was the only sound: Then he heard Orite voices; and now he could feel the tread of Orite feet upon his chest.

He opened his eyes to a swaying glare of light. A foot above his chest and neck a hooded light cast its lurid orange glare down on him. As his eyelids fluttered up, the Orite voices, speaking in their own language, sounded startled.

Nixon's gaze swung. There were other Orites on the ground, with a ladder leading up to his chest. And nearby, a crowd of Orites and Gorts stood watching with awe. Nixon saw that he was approximately where he thought he had fallen. The rock butte was some twenty feet away, with the barrage bars futilely standing before it. Again Nixon tried to move one of his legs, and then he realized that

he was chained, with chains and ropes that were pegged to the ground.

"You recovered too quickly, giant," Tork's voice said. "For your own good you should have been unconscious as we planned."

With a rush of horror, Nixon realized that these little figures up by his neck were Orite surgeons. Their paraphernalia was mounted there at the base of his throat. The orange light gleamed on their instruments. One who was goggled held a tiny circular blade. It whirled with a faint humming; a revolving knife, electronically heated. Nixon could feel its radiating heat on the skin of his throat as the surgeon held it poised.

Vivisection! Nona and Loto had been right. Tork at last had persuaded the Orite leaders to order this.

"Wait!" Nixon muttered. He was still dazed, bathed with the sweat of weakness. "Where is Frane? Get Frane!"

This damnable roaring in his head made everything seem so blurred and far away. Nixon's eyelids drooped, but he opened them, fighting the drowsiness. And it seemed that his head was clearing. The shock of the violet bolt had knocked him into temporary unconsciousness. But now the poison, or the drug, was wearing off. If he could stall this for a time—

It was a vague, formless thought that he knew was hopeless. "Frane," he said again. "Get Frane."

"He is not needed," Tork's suave voice said.

From the ground beside Nixon, Frane's voice sounded. He was talking in his own language, angrily expostulating. Then he called, in English, "I tell them this is not necessary."

"But your success with the drug is postponed too long," one of the Orite leaders said. "Tork says you are doing your best, but—"

"I will succeed within another night," Frane desperately promised. "One more experiment—" Surely the aged scientist was doing what he could to stall this. But they had lost confidence in him. He should have used the panther, and then this giant man long ago. Frane was a brilliant chemist, but he had no qualities of dominating leadership.

"Only this can help you," the leader



He knelt down in amazement,

said. His voice carried finality. He gestured, added a command in the Orite language to the surgeons.

Nixon could feel the figures on his neck moving to begin their gruesome work on the prone, half-conscious giant. But Nixon was more conscious, stronger now than they realized. He strained at the cables, but found that he could move far less than when he had been bound on the Spaceship. His head could shift a little so that he could glance sidewise, but that was all.

"Stop it!" he gasped suddenly. "You damn little butchers—" He'd frighten them with his voice. Roaring, bellowing and twisting his head. That was all he could think of to do . . . The end of Allen Nixon . . . A vision of the rippleless Florida bayou, his brother Ralph, their

cabin under the grey oaks and cedars came to him . . .

Then suddenly, out in the moonlit distance of the rock-slope between the pyramid-cities, cries were sounding. The surgeons on Nixon's neck stood tense, peering, listening. A turmoil of wild cries sounded off there. It spread to the cities. Cries, then Orites screaming. And in another moment a huge tawny shape came leaping from the shadows. The panther!

NIXON gasped. Then his roar held his mingled horror and a queer sort of triumph. "So now you've got something else to worry about!" he shouted. "There it is—mean and hungry. Take a look at that critter, you damn butchers, and see what you're going to do about it!"

The panther was loose, Nixon remem-

bered now, how Loto had said it was in a cave with a purple barrage barring the entrance. Loto and Nixon had never thought of it—that when Loto pulled the barrage-switch, for that moment the panther's barrage had blacked out the same as Nixon's!

Tork was stammering, "Why I—I sent men to verify that it was still there! The darkness of the cave—the barrage was only off for a moment—they must have thought—"

"Well, it isn't there, it's here!" Nixon roared. "Go ahead—carve me up, if that panther gives you time!"

It was the supreme catastrophe, that raging tawny beast loose among the scurrying, tiny human figures. The screams were horrible as it pounced on a group of them who were trying to reach the shelter of one of the pyramids. With sunken sides showing its ribs and madly lashing tail, the panther gobbled up the tiny figures. Orite humans, each of them hardly a mouth. Then with another leap, the great amber-eyed cat was pouncing again. A line of Gorts with suicidal willingness to attack, stood their ground as it came at them. A sweep of its huge paw knocked them away.

Around Nixon, for those few horrible seconds, the Orites stood stricken. "Go ahead," Nixon said. "Kill it. Why don't you folks kill it? If you don't it sure as shooting will kill you."

Now the beast seemed to see the giant figure lying here in the orange glare. It stood with bared fangs and red-rimmed eyes. Then a rush of Gorts distracted it, so that it turned and leaped over them. Down on the ground beside Nixon, the crowd of Orites were milling around in terror. The surgeons and their assistants were trying to get down the little ladder at his side.

"You can't kill it!" Nixon roared. "But I can. Turn me loose, you little fools!"

He strained at his bonds. Life or death now, for himself as well as hundreds of them. Nixon knew it. That panther would be here any minute, ripping him apart.

"You can kill it?" Frane gasped from the ground beside him.

"I'll damn sure try!"

Frane shouted at the panic-stricken Orite leaders. And suddenly in their

emergency they trusted him. Gorts came rushing, casting loose the chains so that in a moment Nixon was staggering up. The chains fell from him with a thin clatter. For a moment dizziness swept him, but then it passed. He was free. And to Nixon of the bayous freedom was strength.

Off across the moonlit slope, strewn with dead and dying Orites, the panther was crouching. Its purring snarl mingled with the lashing of its tail as it saw Nixon rise up. Then with a roar it leaped at him.

Nixon made no move to jump aside. He had ripped off his jacket and shirt, wound them around his left forearm. There was an instant when the moonlight gleamed on the beast's wild eyes and opened jaws as it leaped. Then Nixon thrust his padded, crooked arm outward and up as the jaws came at his throat. The impact of the huge tawny body knocked him backward. He felt the jaws closing on his arm as he fell with the beast on top of him. In a moment they were rolling, with Nixon desperately squirming and lunging, trying to get a grip on the great cat's throat. He could feel the claws ripping his clothing, his flesh, with his blood spurting and white streaks of hot pain shooting into him.

NIXON'S fingers gripped the loose skin of the panther's neck. But at once he knew it was no use. The beast's strength was too great. He felt the rippling muscles under the loose skin resisting his clutch. Then the great jerking body tore loose; the jaws relaxed their grip, dropped his arm, came again at his throat . . .

As the giant went down, a horror-stricken cry had gone up from the crowds of watching Orites. Now the great antagonists were rolling. In a moment they had crossed from the edge of the rock-slope almost to the sward where the Spaceship cylinder had landed. Nixon could feel the crackling sward under him. Hot blood in his eyes blurred everything. He managed to wipe it away, and thrust out his padded arm again for the brute's jaws to grip.

Then Nixon's right hand, brushing the bristling sward, came upon a jagged sliver

of rock in that very fragment blasted from the cliff by that first storm upon his arrival. Both heavy and sharp, it made a terrible weapon. With a whirling lunge he jammed that clumpy spear of rock into the panther's slaving jaws—on down into its hot and roaring gullet. In a moment the beast's snarls were choked with blood. With its human antagonist momentarily ignored, the puzzled, choking brute was staggering, flinging its head from side to side. Then it was rolling on the ground, with paws frantically fumbling at its mouth.

It was Nixon's chance now. He flung himself on the beast. His frantic fingers closed about its windpipe. The panther screamed and writhed, but Nixon's grip was inexorable. The screams died to slobbering gasps. At last the tawny shape was lying on its side. For a moment the paws convulsively jerked. Then it was motionless.

VII

A DAY HAD PASSED SINCE the giant had been released, and night had come again. The Earth-giant now had become a hero to the awed Orite people. Or at least, whatever terror of him they had was submerged in their cheering when the monstrous panther was dead.

Nixon had found himself a cave-like recess off at the base of the green cliff a few hundred yards from Frane's laboratory. Soon he would fix it up to be comfortable. He brought himself food and water now. This morning he had explored the nearby valley which opened into this one through a mile-wide defile. Thousands of the Orites lived in the other valley; their mound-dwellings dotted the slopes at the base of the enclosing cliffs. A stream of orange water babbled along one side of the valley floor, and there were strips of vegetation near the water. Strangely shaped bluish trees about the height of Nixon bore fruits and pods of several kinds which were edible.

It was a day of exultation to Nixon, this freedom to roam around and do things for himself after his long imprisonment. Towering master of this miniature world. There was another valley where a hundred or so tiny factories glow-

ed and hummed. Everything stopped when the Earth-giant appeared, with the workers thronging the little doors and windows, peering up in awed silence at him . . . An exultation to it. And then suddenly Nixon had felt the sense of responsibility. There was so much that he would have to learn, and plan, and then put into action.

Last night, when the panther was dead and the panting, bleeding giant had stood with crowds of tiny figures cheering him, suddenly Nixon had found himself making a speech. It was halting, certainly, anything but fluent. Nixon was always a fellow sparse of words. He tried to tell them that just because he was so gigantic, no one need fear him. That now he would live among them for a time, and try to help them in every way he could. His naive, youthful grin accompanied his words. Then the Orite leaders had arranged to meet with him presently; and whatever now he needed for his comfort, he need only ask for it . . .

"The people all want you for our leader," Nona was saying enthusiastically. "Everyone talks of it. The Gorts look to you for commands."

It was mid-evening now as Nixon sat in the mouth of his cave, with Nona and Loto on his upraised knee. A leader. Fair enough, Nixon thought. No one can argue with a man seventy feet tall! But Frane's growth-drug soon would change everything. The Orites would be as big as Nixon. A whole new civilization to be built in the giant size.

"I'll do my best," Nixon said earnestly. He added suddenly, "Where is Tork?"

In the tumultuous events of the past night and day—the joy of his release—there had been no time to worry about Tork.

"Where is Tork?" Nixon demanded. Loto and Nona did not know. "Maybe the panther chewed him some," Nixon said. "I wouldn't mourn none."

Nona shook her head. "He was with my father, there where you had been lying."

"Besides, I saw him an hour after that," Loto said.

Nixon's eyes flashed. "You can be sure of one thing," he said grimly. "As soon as I get my bearings around here,

we'll get to the bottom of Tork's monkey-shines."

Tork's followers, however many of them there might have been, now certainly seemed to have evaporated. Nixon knew that was natural enough. Whoever had listened to him, now would probably never admit it.

And Tork now had vanished. Perhaps he feared that he would be blamed for having so strongly urged the vivisection of the giant. "He's not at his job in the laboratory, working with your father?" Nixon suggested.

"No, father has not seen him," Nona said. "Father sent to his home, but Tork has not been there."

Frane had promised that his experiment with the growth-drug this evening would be the last, his triumph, the final success. It could come any moment now. And all the little Orite colony knew it, was waiting with excited expectancy for the waving shaft of violet light which Frane had said would show from the top of the laboratory building when the growth-drug was completed.

Down the length of the glass-like cliff-base, Nixon could see the little laboratory building about a hundred feet away. It was humming with activity.

"Well," Nixon said, "nothing to do but wait and see. I sure hope he gets it."

TENSELY they waited; the giant hunched at the mouth of his cave with the two tiny figures perched on his bent knee. The hours passed. The moon rose. Then Nixon sucked in his breath, and Nona and Loto gave their little cries. From the top of the laboratory the little light-beam was waving. Success! Frane had accomplished it.

"He did it!" Nixon exulted.

"Yes, he did it," Nona echoed. "My father, I'm so proud of him."

"Let's go over there," Nixon said. "I'll carry you."

He raised them to his shoulder and they clung to the collar of his shirt. They were halfway there when a tiny scream sounded. Then another.

"That came from the laboratory!" Loto exclaimed.

Nixon started running. "Not so fast!" Nona gasped. "The wind up here—"

He went slower, stopped at the waist-high laboratory building. As he stooped to put Loto and Nona on the ground, a tiny figure came scurrying from a side door. Nixon had no chance to seize it. In an instant it had disappeared into the shadows.

"Run inside!" Nixon said. "See what happened."

There was a turmoil in the little building; tiny running footsteps and the horrified voices of the Orite chemists who had been working there. Then in a moment a group of them came out. They were carrying Frane. The sobbing Nona was with them; Loto came, solemn and grim. Silently the giant Nixon stepped back, then knelt, gazing down in awe at the miniature tragedy here at his feet.

Loto explained what had happened. Frane had taken the completed drug into his office. Tork evidently had been lurking, waiting for this moment. He had killed one of Frane's men who got in his way, darted in and stabbed the unsuspecting Frane . . .

"Then that was Tork I saw running out," Nixon said. He checked his impulse to jump up and rush away to seize the damned murderer. How could you find a tiny, scurrying, six-inch figure in this expanse of moonlit crags?

Frane was not dead, but he obviously was dying. They had laid him on the ground. He saw Nixon's face so high above him, and he called faintly.

"Come closer, giant. Tork was triumphant—he told me what he had planned. I was so stupid—I would never believe ill of him—"

Tork had planned to organize an expedition to go to Earth. With the growth-drug, they would go in their normal small size. Then on Earth, they would use the drugs and get large. There was no real limit to growth through Frane's drug. Frane had meant it to be governed by environmental needs but the more one took the larger he would grow. Giants on Earth! They could make themselves what on Earth would be men a hundred feet tall.

"Tork always said your Earth is so much better a world than Orana could ever be," Frane was saying. "With fighter-Gorts a hundred feet tall on Earth,

he felt surely that your world could be conquered."

And many of the Orites here, and the Gorts they controlled, had felt the lure of it. The Orite Government would oppose it. They would have no desire to embark upon the murderous conquest of a neighboring world. Then Tork and his followers would have seized the Government. And more of the Orites would have rallied around him, of course. It is instinct to follow a successful leader.

But with the Earth-giant dominating Orana now, Tork's fellow plotters had melted away.

"Well," Nixon murmured grimly, "what does he think he can do now?"

The answer came almost with Nixon's grim question. "Look!" Loto gasped. "Off there!"

Then Nixon saw it. In the notch between the towering rocks where the pass led into the broad adjoining valley, a figure had appeared, not a tiny six-inch figure but an upright man-shape that seemed about as high as Nixon's waist. It was Tork, and he was half as big as the Earth-giant now! Long since, Tork's clothes had burst with tiny shreds that had dropped away so that his bluish flesh glistened in the moonlight.

For an instant Nixon stood transfixed. And as he stared he saw that Tork was almost visibly growing! Already he seemed a little taller. The moonlight showed his face; he was leering with triumph. Another giant to challenge Nixon's mastery of the Orite world! Soon he would be as big as Nixon . . . then larger . . .

WITH the shock of realization, Nixon tensed, bounded forward. Instantly Tork disappeared, ducking back into the pass. Almost at once Nixon stopped his pursuits. This could be a fatal error, chasing the growing Tork who might elude him long enough to become so large that he could kill Nixon easily!

"Get me some of the drug!" Nixon called. "Run in there, Loto—get it quick! He'll be larger than I am in a few minutes, by the look of him!"

"In my office," the dying Frane gasped faintly. "There were three cylinders."

Loto and several of the chemists ran in. It seemed an eternity of waiting, with

Nixon's mind picturing his enlarging adversary out there in the other valley. But it was only a moment before Loto and the chemists came back. The drug-cylinders were gone! Tork had made away with them all!

Nixon turned and ran for the pass. That damnable delay! He cursed himself for having waited to try and get the drug! Tork by now might already be too big to handle . . .

The broad valley beyond the pass lay shining in the moonlight. The lines of trees and the little orange river were off to the left. For a moment Nixon stood peering. Was Tork here? Evidently the Orites who lived here had seen him. Their tiny cries sounded. Nixon could see terrified groups of them running.

Then the figure of Tork suddenly rose up from a rock-cluster on the other side of the little river. He had been crouching behind a line of trees. Now with a cry of triumph he straightened, bounded over the river. He was about Nixon's size. He shouted,

"Not a giant any more, are you? Well, this is the end of you, Earthman!"

Tork was holding a dripping chunk of rock which he had seized from the river bank. He flung it, but Nixon ducked. The rock went thudding out across the valley. Then as Nixon held his ground, crouching, Tork's body struck him. The impact knocked Nixon backward, so that he fell with Tork on top of him. It startled him; he had not realized that Tork's body would be so solid, far heavier now than Nixon's.

Then they were rolling, locked together, jabbing, pummeling. In a rough and tumble, Nixon had always been very handy. He was exceedingly agile, and now the heavier Tork could not hold him. In a moment Nixon was up. He found himself at the edge of the babbling little stream. He seized a tree. It was thick, half as big as himself. Desperately he wrenched it up. The knob of heavy roots made it like a maul, a bludgeon. Tork was scrambling up. Nixon hit him with a swing of the tree-root. He staggered, went down, this time with Nixon on top of him.

But now Nixon realized that Tork was a full head taller. As they struggled, with Tork heaving up, trying to ward off Nix-

on's blows, Nixon could feel his antagonist's body expanding. It was gruesome. It shot a fear through Nixon. If he didn't kill Tork now in a moment or two, he never would! And Tork knew it. He was fighting on the defensive, just waiting until Nixon would be only a stripling in his grip.

Then they were rolling again on the ground. They were close beside the stream, with the brittle underbrush crackling under their plunging bodies. Several times Nixon had gotten a grip on Tork's throat, but always the strength of Tork's big hands had broken it. Now Nixon was desperately trying to roll Tork into the water. Evidently the Orite didn't realize it. He lunged, and as Nixon twisted and heaved, Tork went backward with his head and shoulders splashing. The stream was a foot or two deep here, babbling over stones. Tork's head went down; the water splashed over his face. And then again Nixon gripped him by the throat. In Nixon was the grim thought that this was the way one gripped 'gators under water. His hands pressed down; his body was sprawled, braced and taut to hold the lunging Tork.

The orange water was lashed into turgid green foam. Tork was coughing, choking. It was easier to hold his head down now. His hands tore at Nixon's wrists but could not break the hold. Then Nixon could feel the plucking hands and the lunges of Tork's huge body growing weaker. Through an interval Nixon clung, and then he released his grip and staggered panting to his feet. In the babbling stream the big body of Tork lay motionless; a horrible, goggling, staring face blue with the orange water lapping over it . . .

AN Orana year went by, a succession of brief days and nights while Nixon worked and planned to help the Orites build their little world into something safer, more comfortable than it had been before. Frane had died. The Orite doctors and surgeons could not save him. The growth-drug was gone. Tork had hidden the tiny cylinders somewhere, but they had never been found, and no more of the drug could be made. Certainly not now; Frane and Tork were the only ones who

knew the full details of the process. Nixon felt that was just as well. A thing diabolic. Like atomic fission, in evil hands it could wreck its world.

Now, with the year passed, it had been agreed that they were to take the giant back to Earth. Loto and Nona set out with Nixon along with a group of the Orite scientists and leaders and a few hundred of the Gorts, most of whom had been on the trip before.

It was the same little spaceship. Now the giant need not lie bound, he could crouch carefully on one elbow, or shift a little if he was wary of his movements. The trip seemed far quicker than before, with Loto and Nona to talk to and all his tiny friends here in the humming interior around him. Then through the bow-port the mellow, crescent Earth swung into view, a great cloud-mottled disc.

Then one Earth-night they were sliding down through the stratosphere, skimming an ocean and over the land . . .

Florida. Nixon's heart pounded as he gazed down at it. The Florida moon was brilliant in the sky as the gleaming little cylinder slid silently into a patch of wire-grass and rested on the ground. Only a marsh-hen was disturbed, rising with its discordant cry and winging away.

The cylinder opened and Nixon rose up and out of it. The top closed again, and from a lower tiny doorway of the glistening ten-foot shape, a few of the little Orite figures came out, gazed upward. His friends.

"Goodbye, my giant," Nona called. They were all waving.

What was there to say?

"Goodbye," Nixon spoke softly. "I sure wish you well."

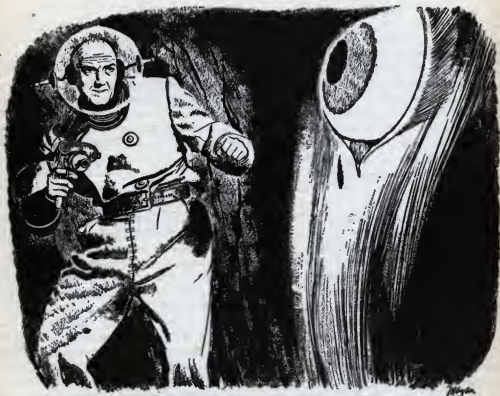
They turned, went back inside. The port closed. The sleek, tiny ship slid upward and away into the moonlight. It was a shining little streak for a moment; then a glistening dot, small as a firefly. Then it was gone.

For a moment Nixon stood with a strange sense of loss upon him. But here was Earth. Home. A light was burning in the cabin across the sandspit. The bayou glistened in the moonlight.

Silently Nixon turned and walked up the oyster shell beach toward his home.

TIME TRAP

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG



My arms seemed to freeze!

Somebody waited for old Charley Grimes, plodding across that darkside Luna crater—somebody who couldn't exist.

CHARLEY GRIMES WAS A BIG man who had been everywhere in the Solar System and collected trophies which were as strange and shining as the stories he liked to tell.

His face was as gaunt as the jungle mask and, when he lit a pipe and smoked it, you watched to see where the smoke would drift. It wasn't hard to picture it drifting over the mountains of the moon or across the flat red plains of Mars.

We were sitting around a campfire in the Rockies just as our ancestors must have sat five hundred years in the past. We were swapping yarns to get Charley started, and watching the sun sink to rest on clouds shaped like wild mustangs when

the talk drifted to the dark side of the moon.

You know what it's like on the dark side. The brittle stars shine down and the great craters loom up, but when you're flying low in a rocket ship about all you can see through the viewpane is a circle of radiance spotlighting a desolation as bleak as the Siberian Steppes.

You miss so many things you don't dare even think about the earth. If you're an escapist you cover your bunk with pictures of the lush Venusian jungles and pretend you're somewhere else. But if you're a realist you go outside and come to grips with the bleakness in one way or another.

Charley was a realist.

"So I went wandering off just to see what I could find!" Charley said.

We watched him get up, throw another log on the fire and draw his Indian blanket around himself—so tightly he looked like a great swathed mummy swaying in the glare.

"Nothing tremendous ever happens when you go exploring with all the trimmings!" Charley went on. "You've got to be devil-may-care about it. So I just made sure my helmet was screwed on tight and went striding away from the ship like a clockwork orang-outang!

"If you've been on the dark side you know that there's a sensation of bitter cold at all times—even when you're bundled up and in motion. You keep looking back and wishing you hadn't—and before you can count the stars in a square foot of sky you're at the bottom of a valley with glacial sides and the desolation is so awful you want to sit down on the nearest rock and never get up!"

Charley sat down, crossed his long legs and took a deep, slow puff on his pipe.

"I shouted—just to hear the echoes come rolling back. You can talk to yourself that way and get comfort out of it, because what you'll hear will be the giant in yourself. The valley was so big a soaring eagle would have burst its lungs trying to fly out of it.

"But don't get the idea I climbed down over an icy slope on a rope. I simply sat down and let myself slide. Smooth? There wasn't a crevice or a projection until I reached the bottom and picked myself up."

Charley nodded. "I had to lift off my helmet for a minute, to shake off the ice. That's when I shouted and heard the echoes come rolling back.

"I'd clamped the helmet back on, and was adjusting my oxygen intake when I happened to glance down at my big, square feet."

Charley chuckled.

"I've got outsized feet even when I'm as bare as a baby. But I was wearing heavy moon-shoes, and the prints I'd left in the snow were eight inches across!

"There was a straight line of prints, as big and square as my own, leading out across the valley—prints I couldn't pos-

sibly have made. I'd stumbled around a bit, of course. But I hadn't budged two yards from the base of the slope.

"The oddest thing about that single trail of prints was the fact that it started right where I was standing!

"An icy wind seemed to blow through me. On the moon you don't slide down a steep slope and land right where someone else has been standing. Not if you're in your right mind, you don't. The moon isn't that thickly populated.

"I was badly shaken, I can tell you! But I didn't sit down and brood over it. When you go into a huddle with yourself on the moon you're apt to wind up looking like an ice-carved replica of Rodin's Thinker.

"I simply shaded my helmet with my palm, to cut down the starshine, and stared across the valley. The valley was about a mile wide, and as smooth as a skating rink over most of its surface. But about halfway across a big mound of blue-gray sandstone broke the monotony by looming up on the frozen plain like an African termite's nest.

MAYBE you've seen some pictures of those big nests in travel books. They were usually photographed with seven-foot natives standing beside 'em, to make you realize what insects could accomplish. Old travel books, of course, because Africa is just one big stone highway now.

"Those nests were huge, weren't they? If my memory doesn't betray me—some of those nests were twelve feet tall.

"Uh . . . Uh. But this mound would have dwarfed twenty termite nests in a valley of giants—all tumbled together and piled up in a skyward direction.

"As near as I could make out the footprints ran right up to the base of the mound, and stopped there.

"Well . . . you can be sure I didn't just stand in my own prints goggling up at the stars. I followed that impossible trail—straight out into the valley as fast as I could clump.

"It took me about ten minutes to reach the mound. Once or twice I stumbled and almost went sprawling. But whenever I felt the plain slipping out from under me I shot a quick glance at the mound and its sheer massiveness steadied me.

"Close up it had a corrugated, hoary look, as if it had bubbled up out of the ground when the moon had a molten crust and been fused into a mound by fire and earthquake.

"But when I halted directly in front of it I saw that it wasn't as solid as it looked. It was riddled with little dark holes, as though a woodpecker had spent at least a month making a wreck of it. And at its base there was a wide, dark, tunnel-like opening.

"Another man might have thought of a hundred excuses for not crawling through that tunnel on his hands and knees. But when my curiosity is aroused I'm a very special kind of idiot.

"The tunnel was about twenty feet in length. I crawled along through the darkness with my atomic blaster slapping against my hip, my heart hammering against my ribs.

"When the smothering feeling you get in tunnels began to wear thin I knew that it would be safe for me to stand up. You can feel a stone wall arching above you without touching it, and I knew suddenly that I was in the clear.

"When I got to my feet and stared about me I could see the dark end of the tunnel and what appeared to be stone walls hemming me in. The walls arched away into shadows, and were faintly luminous.

"I've spent as many hours underground as there are seeds in a watermelon—so I can take a cave interior in my stride. But the mound wasn't just hollow and cavelike and filled with wavering shadows. It was—occupied!

"He was sitting on a projecting ledge in deep shadows. But the wall behind him glowed, and I could see him clearly. He was wearing a spacesuit exactly like my own, but it was all shriveled up over him.

"Take a little money—a lemur or a spectral tarsier will do—and put him inside a cumbersome spacesuit, and let his bright eyes shine out through the view-pane. Do that—and you'll have as clear a picture of him as I could give you if I rambled on for ten minutes.

"I couldn't see the little fellow's face through the pane. It was all a shadowy blue. But I could see his bright eyes, and

I could tell he was little by the way the suit overlapped, and bulged out in the wrong places.

"You know how a kid of eight or ten looks when he puts on a man's suit on Hallowe'en? But this wasn't Hallowe'en, and he wasn't trying to scare anyone!

"He was too scared himself. He was shaking all over and when he saw me his eyes got even brighter, and he started to get up. He was trembling so I had to help him to his feet.

"I steadied him with one arm and lifted off the helmet with my free hand. As you know, you can stay outside a suit on the moon without getting frost-bitten for about half a minute.

"When his face came into view and his eyes looked straight into mine I was so startled that fifteen seconds were lost right at the start—before a single word could be exchanged between us. But at least I had a chance to get a good look at him.

"If you saw yourself as a boy of ten, suddenly, without warning, would you recognize yourself? Maybe some men would. If you looked at yourself a lot in a mirror when you were growing up—or kept photographs of yourself, carefully preserved in an old album, you might not have any trouble. Right off you might hear yourself muttering, 'Why, that's me!'

"But I had trouble. The kid's face was just enough like my own to give me a start. But I couldn't really place it—couldn't remember where I had seen it before.

"Then the kid spoke. 'I—I thought you were Pops! But you're not! He's older! Where am I? How did I get here?'

THE voice did something to me. You get a chance to hear yourself talking a lot when you're knee-high to a grasshopper. And I had no kids of my own! But my own father had looked enough like me to be my twin brother, and if this kid thought I was his dad—

"It hit me between the eyes—and like a voice screaming at me through a blur of spinning suns!

"I was staring at myself as I had been long ago—and no tracks made by a dead man in a bog could have been more nerve-shattering.

"He wasn't even a poor little kid in a desperate plight, because you can't feel paternal about yourself! He was a tormented ghost out of the past, and for an instant I had an impulse to blame him and rail at him for returning to torture me.

"But I'm not a cruel man, deep down, and that crazy impulse passed quickly. He was a poor little lost cuss, even if he *was* myself, and all my sympathy went out to him.

"I even forgot for a moment how insane the whole thing was. He was gasping for breath, so I put the helmet back on, and gave the oxygen tube a double twist to straighten it out. But an instant before the helmet descended over his mouth he managed to stammer, 'I was up in the attic playing—'

"Playing 'Pirate's den!' I had spent the happiest years of my boyhood in the attic, pretending I was Captain Kidd, or climbing out on the tree that arched over our house when the December snows weighed it down, and making myself out to be in the crow's nest of an arctic wind-jammer!

"As I swayed there beside myself my mind followed crazy-paved paths in all directions. Great chunks of the past seemed to float before me—like icebergs nine-tenths submerged.

"But all the while the sanest part of my mind was seeking an explanation that would one-tenth explain it! I gripped my own boy-self by the shoulder to make sure he'd stay solid until the man he'd become could get a mental toe-hold on the problem.

"If you can persuade a man to mount a stepladder and plant himself firmly on the air you've taken your first brave step into the unknown. The poor devil may or may not fall. But at least you've made a start in the right direction.

"It isn't too hard to believe that certain things can happen to Time on the wrong side of yesterday—or tomorrow! Time—the physicists tell us—never stops flowing. It's like a melting candle or silk before it hardens on the loom—all crinkled up and sparkling like a dew-drenched spider web.

"If Time melts in a back-of-yesterday dimension what's to stop a man from dissolving with it, and running in a thin

trickle back to his yesterdays? You were a boy once and you could be a boy again—without ceasing to be a man.

"Put it this way. On the dark side of the moon there was a valley of shadows. A big, blundering fool went stumbling into it, and landed in a heap. Before he could pick himself up a part of himself dissolved in some unimaginable backwash of time, and he became a boy again. His boy-self split off from him, and went stumbling off over the plain in a suit five sizes too large for him.

"It's not as impossible as it sounds. The boy you were still exists in Time, and he could emerge from the past to stand beside you in a vortex of dissolving Time. Was there something in the valley that could change the flow of time, reverse it, and twist it around like butter in a churn?

"The answer was right there in the cave with me. But I couldn't see it because *another* space-suited figure was making my brain whirl. He'd come clumping into the cave bent nearly double, and now he was shuffling toward me as though I'd committed some horrible crime I could never hope to atone for.

"Through the pane of his helmet his eyes burned accusingly into mine. But it wasn't until he halted directly in front of me and lifted the helmet from his head that I knew what my crime was and why he found it hard to forgive me.

"I had committed the crime of living beyond my allotted span! The man facing me was old . . . old. His face was still my face, but if ever I had been young and handsome and a target for the wiles of a pretty woman I was so no longer!

"He seemed to realize that I could hardly bear to look upon myself as I would be, for he spoke sharply, quickly, without attempting to explain his presence; or even to prepare me for what he had to say by working up to it like a story-teller with a great load of unimaginable horror on his mind.

"It's a monstrous beast of prey! he croaked. 'It can dissolve Time and reshape Time in a hundred horrible ways?'

"He quirked his head at me. 'You know more than that lad but I know more than you—for I have lived through this moment before! Once long ago I stood in this cave and warned you! You are at

the crossroads of a branching future! If you take the right turn now you will live to become me. But, if you take the wrong turn——'

'He straightened, and pointed with his gloved forefinger into the shadows behind me. 'It is there—at your back! When you turn you will see the shining web which it uses to dissolve Time! All over this valley the creature has thrown a Time-dissolving web of force!'

HIS voice rose warningly. 'It is as intelligent as we are, but it moves with glacial slowness. An inch in an hour—a foot in a day! When it dissolves Time it nourishes itself by drawing the energy-whirl into itself, and spinning it out again in another form, like an immense, living shuttlecock. A spider——'

'He looked at me with a haggard intensity of appeal. 'It will try to hold you with the web—to hold you in complete helplessness until you become a hundred lads and a hundred men. You'll be an infant, a boy of five, a lad of twenty, and a man older than myself. But every time you split up in the folds of the web you'll lose a part of your substance.

'You'll cease to be a man with a past and a future. You'll become a mere hollow shell—no more substantial than I am, and I am little more than a wraith. You'll be drained, and you'll vanish like a puff of smoke. You'll be devoured and swallowed up!'

'He was struggling for breath and the veins on his forehead had begun to swell. 'You've got to blast it down before the web dazzles and confuses you! You'll have to face it to blast, but if you fight it with your mind——'

'Suddenly the helmet was back on his head and he was turning from me. He moved straight toward the lad and put a palsied hand on the shoulder of that younger me.

'Then, slowly, they both turned to face me, and I could see their eyes inside their helmets, trained upon me in desperate appeal. At least——there was appeal in the eyes of the old one. The lad may have been merely terrified, and confused.

'He couldn't have been more terrified than I was as the shadows lengthened

about me, and a coldness crept into my bones.

'I knew I'd have to come to grips with the web. I knew, too, that if it was behind me I'd be safer facing it. When there's something unspeakable at your back, you can die so many deaths just waiting for it to make its presence known that all the courage and decision goes out of you.

'Panic smote me as I turned, hip and thigh like a flat sword. But all I could see for an instant was a faint, moving radiance blending with the shadows, a kind of nebulous flowing in the darkness on the far side of the cave.

'My hand must have closed on my blaster, for I could feel the bite of cold metal against my palm. But there was something about the light that my will could not withstand. My arms seemed to freeze as I stared at it, and terrifying thoughts rushed into my brain.

'At first I experienced only a feeling of almost unbearable oppression. Then something in the glow seemed to reach out toward me and there was no sound in the cave but the beating of my heart.

'A ghastly something seemed to be watching me with a kind of fiendish triumph, as though the soul of a devil lurked in the depth of the light which could send out vampire tendrils, filmed with writhing menace.

'I couldn't tear my eyes from the glow and the longer I stared the worse it got.

'The light seemed filled with an evil purpose. It writhed and changed shape as I stared at it, seeming to sweep out through the walls of the cave and back again with a pulsing greediness.

'Then, gradually, it ceased to blend with the shadows. It became stationary and transparent, hanging suspended in the murky air like a gigantic burning glass.

'As though in a dream-delirium I became slowly aware that a picture was forming within it. A valley swept into view, walled with high, saw-toothed mountain ranges.

'Deep in the weaving radiance I could see a tiny, plodding figure coming toward me across the valley.

'For an instant I thought I was looking at the far-off image of a human figure plodding over the plain. A figure clad

in a heavy space-suit, moving awkwardly—as I had moved.

"Nearer it came and nearer, its reflection floating on ahead of it, bobbing about like a little ship.

"And then, suddenly, I saw that it was *skimming* the plain. It was balancing itself on flapping wings, sweeping across the plain without actually touching it, but so slowly that it appeared to be advancing with the plodding, awkward gait of a man.

"It swerved abruptly as I stared, made a full turn, and soared into the air. It flew straight toward me, its wings beating the air as though it were struggling against a furious uprush of wind.

"There was a sloping wall of light-dappled rock at the edge of the radiance, and for an instant the winged shape disappeared behind it. I didn't see it descend.

"I saw only a shadow forming behind the rock, and swirling out from it. It came into view again abruptly, dragging its wings behind it, hobbling toward me over the ice.

MY spine congealed. The thing that had crossed the valley, was a monstrous bird of prey. It was wearing a spacesuit, but no helmet, and I could see its vulture-like head bobbing about in the glow.

"It seemed to be in pain. It had halted at the edge of the glow, as if fearful of what lay beyond it, and suddenly as I stared it began furiously to pluck and tear at its breast with its taloned foreclaws.

"So frenzied were the creature's exertions that the front of its space-suit came away in shreds. The hideous creature had scales on its breast instead of feathers, and a pulsing, lizardlike throat . . . a throat which turned red as it continued to inflict cruel injuries on itself.

"The impression I got was one of agonized despair, of a creature trapped and cornered that could only escape by destroying itself. Again and again it slashed at its flesh, twisting about in the glow, its eyes brimming with agony.

"Then, suddenly, it was no longer alone. A little bird-lizard shape had materialized at its side and was going through the same grisly pantomime.

"As I blinked in stunned disbelief a

third shape swam into view—and a fourth. The eyes of the third shape were dull and opaque, like frosted glass, and the fourth shape was so atrophied that the scales on its breast seemed to overlap, squeezing out the flesh between them.

"Then, abruptly, the first shape began to grow transparent. It shriveled and glistened, and I could see its skeleton gleaming beneath the glassy transparency of its dissolving flesh.

"It vanished in a gush of gray light, so quickly that the air about it had a sucked-in look. Swiftly, terribly, the other shapes converged toward that swirling vacuum and were swallowed up, as though with their passing Time had collapsed in upon itself.

"That Time *had* collapsed I knew! For I am no fool. Long ago the alien inhabitant of another world had landed in that valley of all horror, and the living shuttlecock had split it up into time fragments, the better to destroy it.

"It wanted me to know that—to realize that my time was short. So it had brought back a scene out of the past to unnerve me, and sap my will!

"Could I go on taking it? I hadn't much time to think about it—for the web was filling with another picture. A living shuttlecock, the old one had called it. So now it was weaving another picture for me on Time's dissolving loom.

"It was a picture so hideous I could hardly bring myself to believe in it. It was a picture of still another me. But if the old one had seemed palsied, wretched, at the end of his endurance—the face that stared out at me from the radiance was a thousandfold more so!

"It was a face that had lost itself in Time—a face that was all sagging jowls and puckered brows, a toothless, yellowed caricature of a face.

"But it was my face still—my face ravaged by a century's decay!

"Looking at myself as I would be—I suddenly had no longer any desire to live. A small, shrill voice shrieked within me that the monstrous, living shuttlecock desired just that—that it was resorting to a devilish subterfuge!

"But I did not heed the voice. I just stood there, waiting to die, hoping that the end would come quickly.

THE BLAST was deafening! The sudden crash of it made a muffled booming in the thin air, and smashed against my eardrums like a trump of doom. The flare was blinding. The awful brightness of it lit up the cave like a hundred suns, and burned through my eyeballs into my brain.

"When the smoke cleared all I could see at first was a shattered something lying on the floor of the cave, all twisted and bent back on itself like a smoking heap of shattered glass.

"As I shook my big, dull head to clear it my boy-self lifted off his helmet and returned his blaster to the holster on his hip. His face was shining with triumph. The sweat was running off it and he was breathing heavily.

"But he spoke to me and his words were good to hear.

"We got him, pal!"

"He didn't say 'it'—didn't refer to the monstrous creature as something unspeakably alien.

"No—why should he? To him it wasn't a horror in the valley of the moon. It was something out of a nightmare and he knew he'd wake up safe in his own little bed at home.

"He was still thinking of me as his father—in a nightmare. We'd been hunting jabberwocks together!

"And that lad was still in me—a part of me! I tell you, it sobered me and made me feel ashamed.

"I was still feeling ashamed when both the boy and the old one vanished. Perhaps melted back would be a better way of putting it. For they did seem to dissolve and flow back, rush back, into me an instant before I found myself standing alone again—in that valley that would never grow old!"

Charley had arisen and was standing by the fire. Suddenly he stooped and threw another log into the flames.

Far to the west the lights of the biggest spaceport on Earth blinked through the purple haze, and every time a ship took off, bound for the great outer planets, the desert would light up for miles.

But that light couldn't hold a candle to the one that blazed in Charley's eyes.

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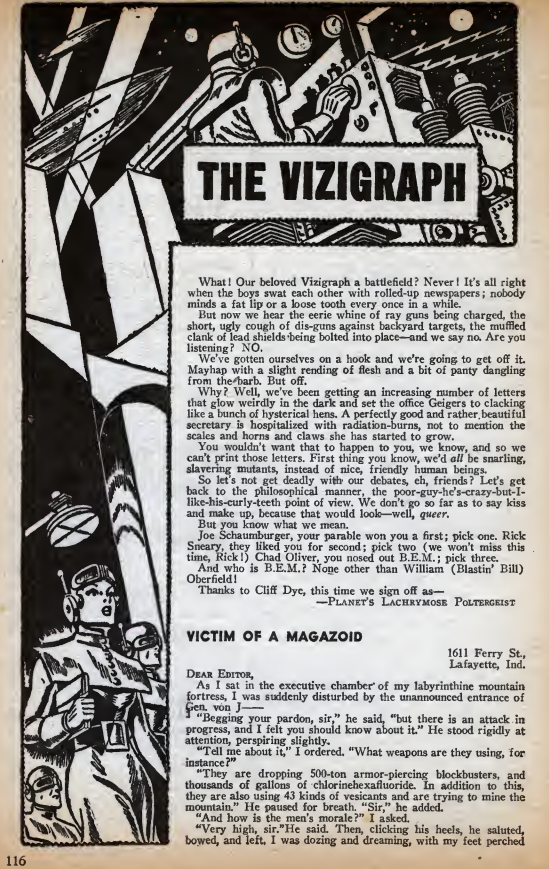
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THE VIZIGRAPH

What! Our beloved Vizigraph a battlefield? Never! It's all right when the boys swat each other with rolled-up newspapers; nobody minds a fat lip or a loose tooth every once in a while.

But now we hear the eerie whine of ray guns being charged, the short, ugly cough of dis-guns against backyard targets, the muffled clank of lead shields being bolted into place—and we say no. Are you listening? NO.

We've gotten ourselves on a hook and we're going to get off it. Mayhap with a slight rending of flesh and a bit of panty dangling from the barb. But off.

Why? Well, we've been getting an increasing number of letters that glow weirdly in the dark and set the office Geigers to clacking like a bunch of hysterical hens. A perfectly good and rather beautiful secretary is hospitalized with radiation-burns, not to mention the scales and horns and claws she has started to grow.

You wouldn't want that to happen to you, we know, and so we can't print those letters. First thing you know, we'd *all* be snarling, slaving mutants, instead of nice, friendly human beings.

So let's not get deadly with our debates, eh, friends? Let's get back to the philosophical manner, the poor-guy-he's-crazy-but-I-like-his-curly-teeth point of view. We don't go so far as to say kiss and make up, because that would look—well, *queer*.

But you know what we mean.

Joe Schaumburger, your parable won you a first; pick one. Rick Sney, they liked you for second; pick two (we won't miss this time, Rick!) Chad Oliver, you nosed out B.E.M.; pick three.

And who is B.E.M.? Nope other than William (Blastin' Bill) Oberfield!

Thanks to Cliff Dye, this time we sign off as—

—PLANET'S LACHRYMOSE POLTERGEIST

VICTIM OF A MAGAZOID

1611 Ferry St.,
Lafayette, Ind.

DEAR EDITOR,

As I sat in the executive chamber of my labyrinthine mountain fortress, I was suddenly disturbed by the unannounced entrance of Gen. von J—

"Begging your pardon, sir," he said, "but there is an attack in progress, and I felt you should know about it." He stood rigidly at attention, perspiring slightly.

"Tell me about it," I ordered. "What weapons are they using, for instance?"

"They are dropping 500-ton armor-piercing blockbusters, and thousands of gallons of chlorinehexafluoride. In addition to this, they are also using 43 kinds of vesicants and are trying to mine the mountain." He paused for breath. "Sir," he added.

"And how is the men's morale?" I asked.

"Very high, sir." He said. Then, clicking his heels, he saluted, bowed, and left, I was dozing and dreaming, with my feet perched

on my desk, when the Visiphone flashed on. I gave it a cursory glance. Gen. Erwin R—

"Out with it," I snapped. "Can't you see I'm a busy man?"

"Yes, sir," he said, "I thought you might be interested to learn that the Nefarians, our enemy, are using atomic bombs and a heat ray. The morale of the men is very high."

"That's nice," I said, "now sign off and let me get back to work." So saying I flipped off the Visiphone, pulled a handkerchief over my eyes, and went to sleep.

A few minutes later—I am not sure how many—I was awakened by the sound of gunfire in one of the antechambers. A few seconds later Cpl. K— burst through the glass door without opening it. He fired a few rounds at something I couldn't see and then turned.

"The Nefarians," he sobbed. "The fiends are using IT." With that he broke and ran for the farthest exit.

"Wait," I yelled, "what about the men's morale?"

"Are you kidding?" he shot back. I switched on the General Communicator.

"Attention," I bellowed, "evacuate the sanjak. Good-bye forever." Then I jumped up and ran for the secreted Hammerrill-Bond flyer that I had put in an abandoned mine shaft. I almost made it. At the last second a thing jumped on me, pulling me down. I realized at once that this was IT. Nothing human had ever got a toe-hold, strangle-hold, headlock, and half-Nelson on me simultaneously. Abruptly I was rolled over and pinned to the ground, unable to move a voluntary muscle.

"Who are you?" I said, "and what do you want?"

"I am a Magazoid, Type FIPS-V3-12-1948, and I want you!" said my adversary. "Now open your worthless eyes and gaze upon my glorious cover." Trembling, I opened first one eye, then the other, and received the shock of my life. The cover was actually good! (Ah, anticlimax, my favorite vegetable!) The Magazoid, sensing my thoughts, bounced on my chest with unholy elation (fiendish glee, that is), then it calmed down a little.

"Read me," it pleaded, "and I'll let you escape. I'll even let you comment on my stories." Tempted by this magnanimous offer, I started to read him (or IT). The first story, *Citadel Of The Green Death*, was quite good and almost plausible. However, it presupposes an extremely stable World Government of tremendous duration. Impossible. When *Kohannes Screamed*—egad, when I read that, I screamed. How awful. Six more stories left. *Mars Is Heaven*—aaaaa, Heaven indeed. It should be set to music. The next story was *Preview Of Peril*. It had a neat twist of plot, but otherwise was just barely mediocre. *Against The Stone Beasts* was pretty good. Jina was obviously a fly-by-night sort of character. Maybe even a Vamp. *Brooklyn Project* was a dilly, and *Synthetic Hero* was easily the second best story of the lot. *Valkyrie From The Void* had a misleading title. It wasn't about Valkyries; it was about some snail-skinned mammalian's cross country trip. Rather well done, though.

Then I came to the Vizigraph (at this point the Magazoid stirred uneasily as though nervous, but when I asked what the matter was, it shrugged and said nothing). So I vote for Sneary,

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DR. MILES

Box DM-9265, Sta. 5 Los Angeles, California

B.E.M., and Shawl, and what happens? The Magazoid jumps up and down on my chest (the switch to present tense is because it is going on at the present time).

"Why don't you vote for someone that can spell?" it screams. "It's guys like Sneary that give the proofreaders a bad name!" With that it starts to kick me.

"Wait a second," I say "What about his views on racial equality?"

"He's got a good idea," says the Magazoid, "but he's wrong."

"Why?" I asked, struggling to my feet.

"Us Magazoids is superior," it says. With that I beat it, not stopping till I get to my hidecut at the bottom of the Tongia Deep

Yours,

A. A. GILLILAND

BLOODY BUT UNBOWED

1028 N. Broadway
Wichita 5, Kansas

DEAR EDITOR,

This issue of *PLANET* isn't so bad, but I don't have a very good opinion of Emmett McDowell. It seems as though he doesn't have the skill to smooth over rough spots in his stories so he just has a dame take off her clothes. By the time the simple-minded adolescent has drawn his tongue back into his mouth and ceased drooling, he is several paragraphs beyond the rough spot.

Mr. Fennel in his short story has shown considerably improvement since his last novel. In this one he shows a pretty good knowledge of human nature. He ought to become a good writer if he will only remember that an old fashioned striptease does not improve a story. *Brooklyn Project* was good especially in the picture it gave of the bureaucratic manner of thinking. The last few paragraphs sounded like they were lifted from a Henry Wallace speech. My congratulations to James Blish for the way he ended his story. It was the most logical way that it could have ended. There could never have been any love between two members of such different races, no matter what some people might think. The great law is that like must appeal to like.

On other matters it seems rather funny to me that the average reader is still unable to figure out what I was talking about. I was writing in English which I naturally assumed that they understood. I said that these Asiatic tribes or races were dirty and I have never seen any attempt to refute that statement. It is a fact that they do not care for the principles of sanitation which we set so much store by. Obviously they could not establish colonies where one of the mainstays would have to be an adequate system of sanitation. Then any attempt to colonize the planets would require a knack for theoretical science which they lack. Then why is it unreasonable to believe that it will be a race that is familiar with science and makes use of it in every day life that will reach out for the stars?

That does not mean that I approve of everything the white race does or consider them so honest that they can put other races in the shade. In fact I have known quite a few white men whose sudden and painful demise would leave the air smelling a good deal cleaner. But does that cancel the fact that they are the best equipped to deal with scientific problems? After all, how could Christopher Columbus have reached the new world if neither he nor any other European had had any knowledge of either shipbuilding or

of sailing the vessels after they were launched?

This is not intended to make any case in favor of persecuting anyone. That is something that I have never done. If a mob were together in this town I would be far more likely to tuck a big Winchester under my arm and try to discourage them than I would be to reach for a rope. But that does not mean that I consider them mentally capable of going to the stars. Their talents just don't lie in that direction.

To that gentleman who mentions Hitler as a member of the white race, I quite agreed. Indeed I didn't have any more use for him than anybody else. However, it wasn't the black race that kicked his teeth out. It was the brains and resources of the other members of the same race. The race that produced Hitler, also produced Edison, Steinmetz, Marconi, Florence Nightingale, Lincoln and a host of others whose work has enriched the lives of millions and will inspire generations yet unborn. However, how many members of these jungle tribes can you name who have labored to help others and whose work will live after them? I can't recall very many. Then is it the white race that has sent out the great expeditions that have spread knowledge to the four quarters of the globe or was it a voodoo-worshipping African tribe? Who built these great hospitals over the world to relieve suffering? Who sent out the hosts of missionaries who have helped all mankind? Who built the great irrigation projects that have made the waste places prosper? It wasn't little black Sambo!

As to Arabic numerals and similar ideas of antiquity, just who do they owe their origin to? The alphabet can be traced back to Cadmus of Phoenicia. He wasn't colored. Neither were the ancient Arabs whose name is attached to our numerals. Euclid of Alexandria who invented geometry and Hero of the same city who first meddled with steam were Greeks not Orientals by any means. So if you condemn the white race for Hitler you must also praise them for the geniuses that they also produced. Annoying, isn't it?

The whole trouble arises from the fact that the readers think that because you should not persecute a person on account of his race or color that that automatically elevates him to being your mental equal. It doesn't. Every race must stand on its own feet and develop its own leaders. It cannot advance by sitting in the sun and howling that it is being persecuted because it doesn't have any great leaders.

Respectfully,

EDWIN SIGLER

DON'T TRUST THE MASTER RACE!

817 Starling Avenue,
Martinsville, Virginia

DEAR EDITOR,

The current issue was quite fine, I thought; in fact, you are definitely on the up-grade again after a one-issue slump with that *Black Priestess* by Fennel, who can do much better.

My main purpose in writing, however, concerns the *VIZIGRAPH*; there was an awfully good batch of letters this trip, and I was pleased to see so many people disagreeing with the sentiments of Cox and Sigler. Personally, I have nothing against these guys; they have a right to their opinion and I to mine that they're wrong.

As you said, Sigler was again leading with his chin; and this time he made at least one statement which was quite incorrect. Before jumping

him on that, let me say that in his comments on pistols and fire-arms, I'm on his side; on that subject he makes sense.

Unfortunately, on the race question he does not; far from it. He says: "I doubt if climate has anything to do with races." As a matter of fact, climate has everything to do with it. Not the climate of today or yesterday; nor that of a hundred years. All mankind, as it happens, descended from a common source; that is a generally accepted fact among authorities. In other words, the different races had common ancestry. The early people, of course, migrated and populated the earth; when they did so they became subjected to environmental influences which has molded them into what they are. True, that a white man living in Africa doesn't become black; not in one generation.

It is also true that acquired characteristics due to environment are not transmitted. Why is it then that the various races differ?

Because in attempting to adapt to outside conditions, a number of natural mutations have taken place; those most suited to surroundings have survived and been passed on.

Naturally putting an African into a temperate climate won't make him more energetic; you can't undo conditioning which has been going on since the start of humanity.

The white race is superior, therefore, because of outside influences, not because of any basically inherent qualities.

The white race is ahead culturally and mentally, and I think we like it; I think the idea of race equality frightens us. Don't get me wrong. Sure, I'd like to feel that I'm a member of a "superior" race; it gives my ego a much-needed boost.

But obviously we're not. From the start we've had all the breaks, and by strategic use of our resources we seem intent on heading for global catastrophe. (And I don't mean to criticize our government.) In other words, the white race has proved itself to be a bunch of damn' fools!

I don't think fans who believe in race equality are starry-eyed; they are merely facing a situation that will probably force itself on us. Sure, I'd like to trust in our master race, but I can't, and I doubt seriously if many other thinking people can.

Yours sincerely,

THOMAS H. CARTER.

SUTURE SELF

3401 6th Ave.,
Columbus, Georgia

DEAR EDITOR,

I've been buying PLANET since Vol. 1, No. 1 and pretty soon now I'll read a copy. I was only kidding. The mag used to be real good when it had such stories as *Vassals of the Master World*. Now, I'm sorry to say, it has degenerated and contains only an occasional worthwhile story. Bradbury leads the parade of your authors.

The Vizi was, as usual, the best thing in ol' PLANET but, as you know, I don't always agree with your correspondents.

Chad Oliver: What scientific proof? Chad, your father is a doctor. Ask him if it isn't true that a negro's brain is smaller than a white man's. If he says, no, tell him I said he should study up on his anthropology. Also, Chad, ask him if it's true that the retreating fore-

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head, the low broad nose, prognathism, and weak chin do not place the negro closer to the anthropoids than other divisions of man. Ask him if the growth of the brain takes place along the sutures and, as the brain develops, these become more and more serrated. Ask him if there isn't a direct connection between the complexity of a suture and the cranial development in that region. Ask him if the Caucasoid isn't developed more complexly in all the sutures than the negro. Ask him if this affects intelligence. That's all for you, Chad. (*Go ahead, Chad, ask him. We'll print his answers.*—Ed.)

Rick Sneyry: If people do not have natural prejudices, then how did we develop them? Who told our primitive ancestors that the negro was inferior. Why did our Caucasoid ancestor drive the Grimaldi man out of Europe?

John Van Couvering: It's true that our race has developed many infamous people.

Yes, the Asiatic Indians are partly Aryan. Most, however, have mixed with the original non-Aryan inhabitants and other races and have therefore lowered themselves. Also the Indian Aryans are a different Aryan type. As proof notice the darker color.

The Egyptians are not and never have been a Mongoloid race. They are Hamitic. In modern times they are a large part Semitic, also. They did not invent the alphabet. The alphabet was invented by the Phoenicians. They borrowed from several races and improved it. The Greeks then improved it further by adding vowels. The Phoenicians were a Semitic people.

Einstein is of Caucasoid blood. I do not consider any race as inferior except the Negro and several of the minor races such as the Bushman-Hottentot (similar to Negro), Ainns, Australoids, Veddas, Polynesian, and a few others. To a very slight extent I hold some prejudices against the Mongoloids.

Give Rick Sneyry the pic. Then Sigler. Then Schaumburger.

PAUL D. COX.

LONG-HEADED HAGGIS-EATER

4766 Reinhardt Drive
Oakland 2, California

DEAR EDITOR,

This is to inform you that I found *The Pillar of Fire* by Ray Bradbury to be the first PLANET story worth re-reading since *The Star Mouse*. Originality! New plot! You are to be commended for your perspicuity (that's what I said, perspicuity) and editorial know-how in presenting us with this nifty. Incidentally, I don't agree with Mr. Bradbury's conclusions in this story, nor can I sympathize with the main character; viewing the yarn objectively, though, I can appreciate it for a fine piece of work.

Also liked was *The Third Little Green Man* which clicked with me as an extended joke. Knight is a funny man and I wish he would give us more of himself—soon.

Edwin Sigler's letter seems to have attracted comment. On this question of racial superiority and the Anglo-Saxon drive (huh?) I would like to express my agreement with Mr. Paul Cox of Columbus, Georgia, who was aptly introduced as a "Columbian." Mr. Cox is right! "Alien races can never live together . . ." he says, referring, I presume, both to Martians and that group of humans who open their breakfast eggs at the large ends. (The Big-Endians.)

Personally, am convinced of this fact; I am also convinced that I belong to the dominant race of which Mr. Cox speaks. My race, an ethnic branch of the Long-Headed Haggis-Eaters, is determined to wipe out lesser groups. First of all we plan to line up all blond-haired peoples—and shoot them. Next will come the brunettes, finally the red heads—we will shoot them all. Bald headed men will not escape. Maybe the Martians will be next; who knows? After all, we are the dominant race.

Mr. Cox and fellow Vizifanners should be aware of our good intentions. All that us Haggis-Eaters want is a place in the sun, *Lebensraum*, and the right to shoot people. If we shoot you—you—and you in the process it is only to emphasize our racial difference and superiority. Eventually, maybe, we will even shoot Mr. Cox. He will understand.

My vote, for first, second, and third place among the letters go to Messrs. Sandison, Perry and Clements, in that order.

In closing, I would like to urge that you have less science in the stories as it gets in the way of the action. For instance, in the story by J. W. Pelkie, entitled *In the Sphere of Time*, I was greatly taken by the scene on page 92 where the hero, one Toka, is being thrilled by some wench named Kolano. "Her voluptuous etc. were thrilling his etc. torso . . . her legginess etc. to thrill his thighs . . . the thrill raced through Toka . . . Kolano's lips moved thrillingly on his . . ." And just as I was getting fairly thrilled myself, why, along came a lot of Dragon Men (*Steggyptious sapiens*) and off dashed Toka, waving his ax. In fact, every time somebody reached out hand, claw and tentacle for a girl, some prehistoric survival appeared and loused up the act. Things like this destroy the reader's confidence in the editor.

Sincerely yours,

GEORGE EBEY.

QUOTES GHU AT GREAT LENGTH

3835 N. Central Park
Chicago 18, Illinois

DEAR EDITOR,

Let's see, what are you this issue? Ah yes, PLANET's *Lectrified Pterodactyl*. Well, my dear Pterodactyl, I should like to speak a little on superiority. The average "fan" is both youthful and of higher than average intelligence. He believes in fair play. He is impressionistic and easily susceptible to propaganda requesting fair play to all minorities, which naturally originates in one of the larger organized "racial" minorities.

Therefore he cannot, besieged by these emotions, calmly and scientifically study the matter of the racial question. The prime law of nature is the survival of the fittest, no quarter given. Naturally man feels hate for any one or any race that he thinks may displace him. Our present material superiority is due to several generations of climatic conditioning. However, climatic conditions are not stable . . .

But, worry not, I have the solution to the racial problem. I have traveled into another probability world to copy from the Book of Ghu these glorious words:

" . . . and so that they may see not differences in their fellow men, let their eyes be removed. So that they may bear no variations in the tones of their neighbor's voices, let their ears be destroyed. Let them may smell or taste a difference, cut from each his nose and tongue. So

that they may not disgrace Ghu by touching their fellows and discover some difference, let their arms and legs be cut from them. And, finally, lest they perceive telepathically that their fellows differ in some way, let their heads be removed.

"Then let them be placed side by side and let the worms in council debate their qualities."

(The Care of Children. The Book of Ghu. Copyright 3245 A.B.C.)

The stories were good, as usual. I especially liked *Brooklyn Project* and *Synthetic Hero*. Chandler's story was also very good. Bradbury is going to be another Lovecraft, I will bet. I do not mean he writes like H. P. L., but it is getting to the point where you say Bradbury is wonderful or be called a heretic. Frankly, I did not care for *Mars Is Heaven!*

Your two novelettes force me to agree with Sigler. I too would rather see them have guns than swords or ray guns. Or would that unmask them for what they really are, Westerns?

Disintegrator rays have always seemed a little bit impractical to me. Whatever their principle may be, they should release a lot of energy when they disintegrate something. Might be like sitting on an atomic bomb and playing with the fuse.

McDowell must have a jungle complex, but he is still good.

Someone tell Mr. Blish that bats are not rodents. And that he is as closely related to rodents as the bats are.

As for *Valkyrie from the Void*, hmmmmmm. The story of how Hunky Dory defeats Ikky Poo. Is this not what they call hack?

The Viz was excellent. Ah, what would we do without Sigler to keep the authors jumping and the readers boiling? Best by Schaumburger. Second by Oliver (he must have quite a collection of originals). Third, oh well, a tie between Sigler and B. E. M. Whatever happened to Streiff and the others?

Respectfully,

RAY JOHNSON

PLACE YOUR BETS NOW

2047 Princeton Avenue,
St. Paul, Minnesota

DEAR EDITOR,

Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen, from Planet Stadium. In a few moments we will witness the Fall, 1948, running of the STF-yard run. The race is covered beautifully, by the top sports-writers, that is.

There are eight contestants today for the big race. This run takes endurance—no lagging in the middle. Another requisite is a terrific start; a slow one can well lose the race. Of course, it's the finish that decides it.

That's why Ray Bradbury in Lane 3 is the favorite. Ray is well known for his solid finishes. Pressing him could be Fennel or Fox. Wells looks good on the outside; McDowell has the pole, but he doesn't live too clean and may bog down in the long run. Best time this year in this event was made by Moses Schere with *Mind Worms*.

There is the gun, and it's McDowell with the *Citadel of the Green Death* out in front, with Fox's *When Kohannes Screamed* second. Behind them is *Valkyrie from the Void*. Bradbury

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got off to a bad start with his highly regarded *Mars Is Heaven!*

They're moving down the back stretch with the underdog McDowell still out in front, but showing signs of tiring. He isn't too clean; he's beginning to fade! When will he learn that clean living really pays off to the best fans? Fox is fading, too. Here goes Wells with *Valkyrie from the Void* at the end of half the race. *Synthetic Hero* is doing well. Far back are *Brooklyn Project* from Tenn (thought Brooklyn was in New York) and *Preview of Peril*. *Against the Stone Beasts* has dropped out. In the back stretch again, it's still Wells with Fennel and Bradbury closing in on the fading McDowell. Look at that Bradbury move up!

Here they come into the stretch—it's Wells, but Bradbury's great finish is going to make it close. It's Bradbury at his elbow, at his shoulder; it's Bradbury in front. Bradbury wins with a great finish! Wells a very close second. Fennel with *Synthetic Hero* edged McDowell for third. Fox got the other place. Too bad he and McDowell couldn't keep the pace they started with. *Brooklyn Project* and *Preview of Peril* collapsed on the track. They didn't belong in this race.

Well, that's it, folks. Bradbury has come through with his best run since *The Creatures That Time forgot*. Nothing like that greatest run in PLANET's history, *Defense Mech*, though. Competition isn't as stiff any more. Ray got third place with *Jonah of the Jove Run*, second last issue with *Pillar of Fire*. Maybe, now that he's back in shape, we'll see him turn in some really great times. Nothing all year has really been terrific.

Got a frog in my throat; somebody must have thrown it there. Until the Winter running, I am returning you to our studio.

KEN SKOUG, JR.

CAN YOU BEAT THIS?

La Fontaine, Indiana

DEAR EDITOR,

Although I have never written to you before, I have been reading good old PLANET STORIES for nearly five years. I think that it contains some of the best science fiction I have ever read. Please keep on giving us such fine writers as Gardner Fox, Emmett McDowell, Henry Kuttner, and Albert de Pina. Knowing that the next issue will reach me in a few days, I have decided to jump the gun and send you a letter that I hope will be worthy of a place in the Winter, 1948, issue. Although all votes were in long before this, I believe I will tell you what I think were the best letters in the last issue just for the record. First place goes to Marion Zimmer, the Mad Martian, for her amusing epistle, second place to R. C. Sandison for his sensible letter, and third to either Tom Pace or Edwin Sigler. I wonder how my selections jive with those picked. Maybe they will be the same.

I wonder if any of the fans who keep files of back issues ever get them out again, read them over, and compare STF of former years with the current crop. Lately I have been doing just that. The first issue I bought was the Fall, 1943, issue, which had that superb cover so many have raved about. Since then I have missed only one copy.

In the hope that this will lead to some action on the part of the other fans, I am going to print here a list of what I consider the masterpieces and near masterpieces of former issues. I

would be pleased to see how lists submitted by other fans compare with mine. Maybe we can have some lively discussion. Here are what I consider the best in each issue:

Fall, 1943,—*Phantom Out of Time*—Bond
Winter, 1943—*Castaways of Eros*—Bond
Spring, 1944—*Wanderers of the Wolf-Moon*—Bond

Summer, 1944—*Warrior of Two Worlds*—Wellman

Fall, 1944—*The Citidal of Death*—Selwyn
Winter, 1944—*Colony of the Unfit*—Carter
Spring, 1945—*Vandals of the Void*—Wilson
Summer, 1945—*Mists of Mars*—Whittington
Fall, 1945—*The Last Monster*—Fox
Winter, 1945—*The Great Green Blight*—McDowell

Spring, 1946—*The Blue Venus*—McDowell
Summer, 1946—*Lorelei of the Red Mist*—Brackett and Bradbury

Fall, 1946—*The Creatures That Time Forgot*—Bradbury

Winter, 1946—(Missed; can anyone supply it?)
Spring, 1947—*Sword of the Seven Suns*—Fox
Summer, 1947—*Vassals of the Lode Star*—Fox
Fall, 1947—*Black Silence*—McDowell
Winter, 1947—*Black Priestess of Varda*—Fennel

Spring, 1948—*The Outcasts of Solar III*—McDowell.

Having used up most of my space, I can say very little about the art work, but I note the artist used on the cover the last half dozen or so issues, Anderson, I believe his name is, seems to put more clothes on most of his ladies than others usually did. By the way, did he draw the summer 1948 cover? (Yes—Ed.) Parkhurst drew some very nice covers as well as some bad ones, but Martin didn't amount to much. The latter is good on inside illustrations, however. I am glad you finally got rid of that awful Doolin. Astarita seems to be a good artist, but Vestal isn't so hot.

What ever has happened to Henry Kuttner, Albert De Pina, and Leigh Brackett? Henry hasn't been around since he did *What Hath Me?* but he appears frequently in another mag of this type (censored). De Pina's last job was a disappointment, but try to bring him back as he was in the old days. I don't care much for Walton and Brabury as a rule but once in a while they turn out something good.

Now I must bid you adieu. I hope the Payne-in-the-neck (no offense meant) who edits PLANET will see fit to publish my ramblings instead of putting it in the wastebasket. I might even get an original, who knows? I guess that is just wishful thinking.

Yours scientifically,

LA VONIA KERR,
"The Venusian Termite"

A REGULAR HELLER

1116—51 Street,
Brooklyn 19, New York

DEAR EDITOR,

Lithe, space-tanned Gene Heller ventured out into the thick, murky night of Terra. His skilled fingers hovered near his ato-ray gun. Gene cautiously proceeded down the sombre street, eyeing the windows for a raised blind slat, regarding the driveways for furtive movements.

Gene was not to be halted. He had a mission to perform. Stepping down into the gutter, he

waded across the deepened chasm. His legs were quickly engulfed by a thick, penetrating, acid-like fluid that had been placed there to prevent his crossing. Luckily, his strong repello-coated trousers saved him from a horrible death.

Emerging on the far side Gene made his way warily to a small wooden structure and placed twenty solar credits on a coarse, outstretched palm. The hand withdrew and Gene heard the faint clicking of tumblers. Then, the hand reappeared holding a sealed, metal container. He seized it and buried it deep within his jacket.

Gene bravely forded the stream of acid once more and began the dangerous trek home. Suddenly, it seemed as if the demons of space and the creatures of the nether world combined to destroy him. The sky darkened, the velocity of the wind rose, and a thick, black soot obstructed his vision and progress.

Hampered as he was, Gene managed to destroy a popeyed Plutonian, a nasty Neptunian, a saturated Saturnian, and a jocund Jovian, who had had designs on his life.

Back in his luxurious quarters, he spurned the attentions of Nalda, the topaz-hued damsel from Antares, set the container against the wall and destroyed the top of the mysterious object with a burst from his ato-ray gun.

Near madness with desire, Gene fumbling extracted the precious contents from the charred container. He staggered to his air-cushioned chair and fell into a trance-like state as he turned the pages of PLANET STORIES.

Gene read the stories in order. After completing them he jotted down these notes:

Citadel of the Green Death—Joel Hakkyt . . . well portrayed by McDowell . . . slight ending slump did not detract from enjoyment . . . Excellent . . .

Against the Stone Beasts—Good . . . began well . . . slumped . . . picked up . . . slumped . . . Good description . . . Could be continued . . . have Anderson and Kimball become regular ol' time travelers . . .

Valkyrie from the Void—The valkyries bore the fallen warriors to Valhalla . . . What'd Ylida do . . . nothing . . . Just makes a mediocre-good grade . . .

When Kohannes Screamed—Fairly good for someone else . . . Poor for Fox . . .

Mars Is Heaven—A gem by Bradbury . . . Very good! Misleading title . . .

Preview of Peril—Fair . . . Poor Wayne, having to return to his sensuous blonde wife . . . what a pity!

Brooklyn Project—Fair . . . good twist to old yarn . . . great ending . . .

Synthetic Hero—Very good . . . At last . . . a well written, well rounded short . . .

Still here to plague me . . . trite expressions: " . . . accentuated her young, well formed body" . . . "The drab, bulky, cloth could not hide her firm, well-shaped 'equipment'" . . .

Letters . . . many . . . good . . . Best, Grimes . . . B.E.M. (that spanish-greek hybrid) . . . Junior Hamilton.

Illustrations . . . best illo . . . McWilliams . . . title page of *Citadel* . . . second place Donel . . . *Stone Beasts*.

Gene stood up. He had finished and the trance had worn off. Suddenly, the door burst open and in came the hordes of evil. Undaunted Gene drew his ato-ray gun. In his left hand was clutched the copy of PS. He faced them, at bay, the courage and goodness shining in his

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clear eyes. The monsters had come for their revenge. Suddenly, their headlong charge halted, edged away, and broke frantically for the door.

To this day Gene doesn't know what broke the charge. It wasn't his gun. They could eventually have overcome that. But if you ask Gene about it, and he knows you well, he'll say, "Mind you, I'm not sure, but I think the beauty of PLANET's cover girl was too much to resist. They ran out to get copies for themselves."

Respectfully yours,

EUGENE HELLER

A SLURP BURP AND A SAG MAG

548 North Dellrose,
Wichita 6, Kansas

GREETINGS TO OUR POPULAR LITTLE PUZZLE:

Ever hear of the Burpian Kingdom? Quaint creatures, these Burps—some tall, some short, some looking like people, some looking like BEMs. Being very interested in the subject of the Burpian Kingdom, I have prepared a scientific paper on the relation to the plant and animal kingdoms. Now, having captured a few of the rarer or unusual ones, so that I might make a study of them, I have placed them in a special city in my room, which hangs between the light and the PS original on the wall.

It was just recently (when I noticed my STF-mags beginning to disappear) that I even remotely suspected that they read STF! One night I stayed awake to catch the culprits in the act, and did I? Well, just listen.

Although the light was very dim (only people with infra-red purple vision can see the Planet Burp and the burpians) I saw a sky hook-grapple slowly materialize out of the air just above my ten-gallon aquarium; then, immediately after it, came a small space-ship with two green burps, a purple burp and a slurp burp, holding tight to the ship. The slurp burp jumped down to the table, pulled up a corner of a competitor of yours and hooked the grapple to it. Up it went and slowly disappeared.

Figuring the sacrifice was worth it, I lay very still even though all my fannish instincts screamed in protest. Next a copy of another competitor went the way of the first. My nerves were on end as it disappeared into the nothingness of the burpian planet Burp. I reached over, ever so slowly, to the space-net I had prepared to capture the culprits. Now all were gathered around a magazine that was obscured from my view. My finger was on the lever that would catch them all in one swift jerk, when the slurp burp screamed and rolled back on his heels (these were all humanoid) and lay on the table doubled up in laffer; soon they were all tumbled around in various positions, yelling their heads off (of course, they can put them back on).

To my amazement I saw what they were laughing at. It was the Fall PLANET! I became very angry at the insult they were handing out to one of my favorite mags. Without realizing it I yelled, "What's so funny?" They all stopped laughing and stood up to look at me. The purple burp squinted his third eye (the one on the tentacle) at me and said, "Look, Kitty, the creatures who read this sloppy mag must be nuts!" I was now very mad. "And wot ya got agin it?" I sez. "Well, in the first place, take a look at that cover!" I put on my dark glasses and squinted at it. "Ya see? That's one of the things. Look at the once-jolly Vizigraph. Wot is it now? A

bunch of guys arguing about each other, tch-tch, and the stories—"I" At this point he pulled a clothespin out of the air and attached it deftly to his nose. "Whew! Ya hafta think anymore to read 'em. Who wants ta think?" (I agreed slightly with him.) "Take this *Mars Is Heaven* . . . sure, it's a good story . . . but it don't belong in PS." (I nearly clouted him for inferring that PS did not print good stories.) "Now this *Citadel of the Green Death* . . . that's more like it . . . and *Preview of Peril*, on the other hand—" (He reached for another clothespin.) "Ahh-ha," he cried, "look at *Brooklyn Project*, the best story in the whole ish, and *Synthetic Hero*, runner up . . . ahhh, sheer ecstasy!" Here his face clouded and he asked, rather puzzledly, "But where did the title and blurb for *Valkyrie From the Void* come from? They were entirely irrelevant to the story." I shrugged my shoulder and confessed my ignorance in the case.

Suddenly another ship came to rest beside the first and out hopped a fuchsia burp. He hollered, "Hurry up, you guys, we ain't got all night!" Whereupon, before I could stop them, the burps attached a grapple to a couple of fannzines and a promag and jumped into their ship to disappear toward the Planet of Burp. I have tried many times since to capture them, but have never succeeded. Well, that's the story. The burps apparently used to like your mag very much, but are of the opinion that it should return to thud and blunder . . . and ya know wot? I agree.

Bye bye for now.

Telisincerely,

TELIS STREIFF

WELCOME TO THE FOLD

1704 McDonald Ave.,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

The truly rabid STF fan does not limit himself to just one mag. He reads them all with the avidity of any other type of addict. I proudly place myself in this category and, as such, feel myself competent to compare one mag with another. I first noticed PLANET on the stands about a year ago. It was the most natural thing in the world for me to purchase same.

For weeks after that, I cursed the impetuosity with which I detached myself from the price of a good hamburger. The surrealistic weirdness which emanated from the confines of a supposedly STF mag was nothing short of disgusting. Doggedly, I started story after story, only to have to quit in sheer bewilderment without finishing one of them.

Last week, I went out again on the prowl for STF reading matter and, to my horror, I discovered that the only mag available on the stands was PLANET. Gone was the *joie de vivre* with which I had made my first contact with PLANET. With much reluctance I considered giving it another chance. However, to an addict, consideration of a desired act is as good as a *fait accompli*. I bought it; I enjoyed it. Therein lies the tale behind this letter.

The Vizigraph (which could be longer) was most enraging. The letters are at least on a par with those found in other STF correspondence corners. In Virginia "Red Witch" Shawl, I find a kindred soul. Her attitude toward sex, as it slithers through the pages of a great many STF stories is downright sensible. The

type of love which usually contaminates otherwise good stories, causes me to suspect that STF is aimed at adolescent readers. I hope I am wrong.

I prefer a lusty man-woman relationship such as existed between Jane Torrant and Martin Wayne in *Preview of Peril*, to some of the high school puppy-love dribble that STF readers frequently encounter. At some of the moronic antics which most STF heroes and heroines go through, Kinsey would stare with disbelief; Havelock Ellis would guffaw with contempt.

Another story that stood out was *Mars is Heaven!* Up to the last two paragraphs, this story had touches of greatness. However, I believe that at the very end, the author lost confidence in his theme, and deliberately introduced a note of vagueness in order to cover up his faltering steps. Belonging with the stories mentioned above are *Synthetic Hero* and *Brooklyn Project*. Irony plus!

As for the rest of the stories in the Fall Issue, the plots fall into the "Cowboys and Indians" routine, which is acceptable or not according to the originality and feasibility of the concept being presented and the style of presentation.

Special mention must go to Joe Schaumburger for his pointed missile in *Vizigraph*, aimed at Sigler. Congrats to you on a very fine issue.

S. J. ANHOUSE.

WE NEVER KNEW TILL NOW . . .

Box 228,
Ralls, Texas

DEAR EDITOR:

Now that you've cleared your file of inferior stories by squeezing them between the covers of the Fall *PLANET* how about some really good stories in the Winter Issue to put the scales back into balance? Really, Paul, did you pay for those stories voluntarily—or did the Author's League hold a bazooka to the back of your head while you made out the checks?

Where do your authors acquire their garbled material and weird interpretations of the ancient wisdoms? Kohonnes is evidently a wordplay on Chohan, for Chohan means Builder. If friend Fox will but dig a little deeper he would learn that the Builders antedated the Pitris and were therefore ethereal rather than physical. When he pictures a Builder with insufficient intelligence to know the effects of his creation—when he pictures a human with greater wisdom than a Builder—hasn't he crossed the border of poetic license and gone blindly astray in the field of literature? If Tlokine is from Lokas, she is then the Night of Brahma, and Grim Thorssen merely fell into a disturbed sector of that Night. In this case Althaya must come from the Red Sunset, but I find no connecting link in his material. That Thorssen came first to the Black Priestess without beholding the Red Priestess is evidence enough that he no longer possessed a physical body when he landed his spaceship on Stormland. Dead—and didn't have sense enough to know it!

Why do we humans imagine ourselves a race superior to those who gave us existence? The Pitris were known as the Boneless, having no power to give Life to Beings with Bones. Their progeny were Bhuta (phantoms) with neither Form nor Mind. They were called the Chhaya

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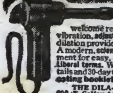
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(image or shadow) Race—and from these were evolved the Race of Humans with flesh and blood and bone. The struggle has been to bring Man to a point where he can comprehend (absorb would be a better word) the Universal Mind through which he may recognize his rightful place in this MāhāMaya—The Great Illusion.

Anyhow, Fox made the Night beautiful. All I can conjure up is a hideous nightmare of such deformed appearance that I shudder at the mere thought of embracing her in the not-so-distant future. If I thought she'd look like Tlokiné by the time I got to her—I'd be tempted to commit hara-kiri!

Oh yes! The "shadows" were born "each of his own odor and kind" . . . so I'm afraid Rick Sneary must give up his dream of one government for an entire world. Racial colors go back considerably more years than is currently believed. The negro isn't black just because his ancestor stood too long under a blazing sun! Neither is the white man white just because his forefathers were scared of ghosts.

Each class of Creators endows man with what it has to give, and there is little that any of us can do about it.

Sincerely,

ROBERT A. BRADLEY

COX CAN TAKE IT

2307 Tenth St.,
Columbus, Ga.

DEAR EDITOR:

Noticing that you had printed my letter in the Fall PS I immediately bought it in order to see what my evil mind had been dwelling on three months ago.

Found quite a bit of other interesting material in the issue. I see that a number of the vizigraph letters were a little riled at my friend and fellow townsman, Paul Cox. Even ye Ed appeared to have resented his remarks anent the races.

I went to see how Paul had received these reactions to his remarks and found him in rather good humor. He's really not a bad guy when you get to know him, and he wrote his letter on white superiority because of scientific facts he had uncovered and not because of a prejudice. I have seen plenty of prejudiced people here in the South who just thought they were better than blacks because they didn't like them. Paul is not that way. I don't say I agree with him but I do say that he made his statements because he thought them to be facts.

Paul's remarks did bring out the entertaining letters which invariably follow a controversial missive. The Vizi was definitely better than usual but it still needs more space. Please, PLP, when do we get the old length Vizi?

Give Joe Schaumburger third for his parable. Paul even voted for the guy. He had a good letter. But I lean toward the letters which had more to say about PS for the top two positions.

James Hamilton has my vote for best letter. Thought his baseball approach was rather clever. Give Van Couvering second for his Drano remark.

To Chad Oliver I bestow an honorary spot of deserving first every time he writes a letter. But I just can't vote for him. The guy must be almost ready to open up an art gallery. But he's always so right in what he says.

Anderson really did a fine job on the cover. I thot, although I still haven't figured out what

is going on. Apparently the wooden looking horse can't either but he is trying desperately to see, and seems to have his eye in the right direction. The two gentlemen of the situation both seem to be mainly interested in laying hands on the fair female in one way or the other. But, like I said, it's good.

Citadel of the Green Death is the best story to grace your pages in many a day. It was even better than Bradbury's latest works, although *Mars Is Heaven* is also a top notch tale.

McDowell is still in a rut when it comes to sex, but I love his characters. You can always tell it's a McDowell opus if the girl loses all— all, that is—of her clothes. I try to overlook these short comings. Not the girl, you understand, just the idea.

Guess you realize the Fall number concluded volume three. I hate to say it wasn't up to its two predecessors, but 'tis the truth. Only a few tales were outstanding. Bradbury's *Creatures That Time Forgot* was great. Very nearly the best thing PS had ever seen. His *Million Year Picnic* was also outstanding, and McDowell contributed *The Green Blight* and his current story. Those would have stood up anywhere, but after them what have we?

Covers were better, and McWilliams is really fine on the illustrations.

But the taint of sex, and the shorter Vizi, plus an excess of mediocre material lowered the standards. Here's a sincere hope that they will again find the heights in Volume Four.

Sincerely,

MILLARD GRIMES

ADVICE TO SQUIRRELS

8917 Cumberland Ave.,
Cleveland, Ohio.

DEAR HON. NITWIT,

Now that the squirrels have gutterly manifested their esteemed stupidities, in preceding issues of PLANET, may I suggest a curb to their ring-tailed, wildcat blather?

Their question is, What is the shortest distance between two points? Priding themselves on their space-loré, you will receive the well-known answer: Why, a straight line. Unremindful of the apparently quite conceited smugness of their great magnitude for writing such unavoidably must-be printed letters, and written with the aforesaid purpose, naïvely and specifically I can smother their incantations with the right answer to the above problem (no offense to the gooby gabglers—not at all)! The shortest distance between two points . . . is . . . bring both points together as close as possible to each other without touching!

GEORGE ANDREWS.

NEVER SAY DYE!

Box 2382,
Williamson, W. Va.

PLANET'S LACHRYMOSE POLTERGEIST,

Congratulations on PLANET's revival. 'Twas a pleasant change and a surprising one. About two years ago I gave up P.S. as dead, and my opinion remained unchanged when I read the last issue of '47. But the Vizigraph was almost as good as it once was, so I decided to try again. Well, the next issue was better, and then—then

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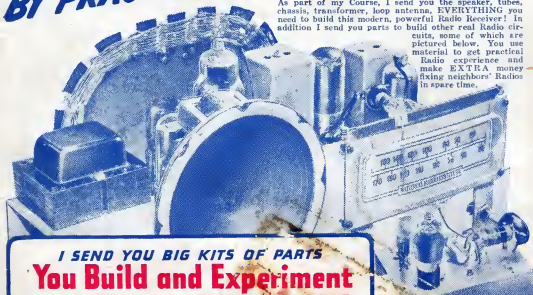
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—came Ray Bradbury's beautiful, truly great story! So—I am back in the fold again.

Tsk—tsk. C² (he's the little guy from the fourth-dimension, I call him that because he's so impossible—he looks like a cubed sphere) just skreenged through the wall again. I wished I could see something from the fourth-dimension, and presto! up popped C². Now I wish I could get rid of him again; he's not so slowly driving me—*get off that ceiling, you little imp!*

Anybody want to start a friendly feud? I won't argue with Sigler because I like the way he presents his arguments even though I strongly disagree with his views. Cox doesn't even exist as far as I'm concerned.

Gotta go now. Give first choice to Oliver (who else?). He likes Bradbury almost as much as I do. Second and third choice to John Van Couvering and James Gray and—ahem—B.E.M. (tied). For last place I nominate Virginia L. Shawl. I don't see how anyone could write such tripe after reading Bradbury's story.

Ugh! Forgot the stories.

They come in this order: Bradbury, Tenn, Fennel, Chandler. The rest don't count.

C² is trying to explain time-travel now, so Goodby,

CLIFFORD DYE.

FOR SEX, ONE VOTE

171 Pelton Avenue,
West New Brighton,
Staten Island 10, N. Y.

DEAR PAUL,

May I put in a counter-kick on the subject of sex in PLANET? I like the babes, with all their equipment included. I think we should have more of 'em, not less. High time we outgrew the idea that there was something dirty about noticing that a young lady* exists below the neck.

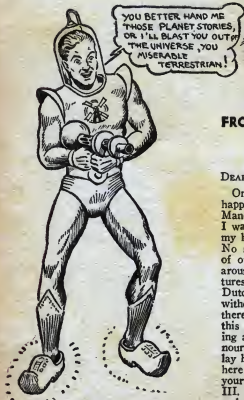
Particular hosannas for the attitude exemplified by the Chandler story in this current issue. I am making that yarn required reading for friends of mine who still think PLANET juvenile.

Whatever the Post Office Department thinks, human beings are bisexual and often behave accordingly. Ask Kinsey; he knows. Taking account of that fact in print strikes me as a healthy procedure, and PLANET has no competitors in doing so. Let's keep it that way.

Regards,

JAMES BLISH.

*Or, for that matter, a young gentleman.



FROM BEHIND THE DYKES

20 Verkuylaan
Badhoevedorp
Netherlands

DEAR EDITOR,

On a swimming tour through Britain, two years ago, I happened to find a couple of your fine magazines in a Manchester newsstand. You can't imagine how delighted I was to have some scientific literature, for in Holland, my home country, one never sees such wonderful books. No spaceports will ever be built on the soft meadows of our flatlands, no mysteries lie hidden in the moors around the Zuyderzee; we have no caverns where creatures of horror might be lurking, and, in common, the Dutchman is said to be a green-cheese-headed Earthling without much fantasy. But—! Let me assure you that there are some exceptions! Even in the moist nights of this water-flown country one can be aware of the teeming activity in the Cosmos. But . . . imagination needs nourishment and fresh blood! How to get it? Where to lay hands, or, rather, eyes on new PLANET STORIES? And here it comes, dear editor! I possess now two issues of your marvelous magazine, numbers 1 and 2 of Volume III. How, I ask you, can I get hold of all the former and forthcoming copies of PS? Can I get a subscription and pay in Dutch money, somewhere in Amsterdam? Please let me know soon! It took me a long time before I dared to start this letter, but now I'm glad I did. Like my drawings?

Sincerely,

J. HENK SPRENGER

(Ja, Mynheer Sprenger, we like your drawings—enough to send you a two-year subscription to PS, starting with this one! Can't help you with back issues, though.—Ed.)